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**Narratives of Transformation: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-  
Revenge Cycle**

by

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## SUMMARY

This thesis analyses the 'rape-revenge' films of the post-1970 period. Against the tendency of existing work in this area to categorize rape-revenge as a sub-genre of horror, I argue that rape-revenge is better understood as a narrative structure which, on meeting the discourses of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced an historically specific, but generically diverse cycle of films. I suggest, therefore, that the rape-revenge cycle might usefully be read as one of the key ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period. Using a model of cultural analysis influenced by Gramsci's theory of hegemony, I argue that it is in the struggle between the feminist stories the rape-revenge structure attempts to tell and the feminine stories embedded in the genres over which it has been mapped that common-sense understandings of feminism are produced. Initial consideration is given to the ideological effects of various generic deployments of the rape-revenge structure in the pre-1970 period. Subsequent chapters explore the ways in which post-1970 deployments of the structure negotiate and rework the 'mass cultural fictions of femininity' inscribed in the genres over which they have been mapped, and the understandings of feminism these negotiations have produced. The ways in which extra-textual material such as reviews contribute to the construction of these understandings is also explored. Additional consideration is given to the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics on Hollywood film, the emergence of the New Right during the 1980s and the characterization of this period as one of post-feminism or backlash. In identifying the rape-revenge cycle as one of the key sites through which the meanings of feminism are constructed and negotiated, I suggest that the most politically expedient form feminist film theory can take today is not one which attempts to *separate* feminist film from mainstream film, the political *from* the popular, but one which attempts to theorize the *relationship* between feminism and film, the political *and* the popular.

## INTRODUCTION: FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

The stories through which we make sense of ourselves are everywhere. In the media, they are not just in the articles and programmes labelled ‘fiction’ and ‘drama’, but in those on current affairs, sport, party politics, science, religion, the arts, and those specified as education and for children. They are in the advertisements. At work, the definition of tasks to be undertaken depend upon them, and the relations between the people involved – some face to face, some very distant. And in our intimate relations there are stories telling us who we are as individuals, who other individuals are and how to relate to them.<sup>1</sup>

As academics, it is tempting to believe that we can stand outside such ‘stories’, that in fact, we must in order to gain the necessary critical distance to analyse them.

However, we often fail to acknowledge not only the way in which, as individuals, we are shaped by such stories but also the way in which, as academics, our own critical positions are constructed by such stories. Most of all, we fail to recognize how, in attempting to make sense of such stories, we ourselves are telling ‘stories’.

The story I propose to tell is one that attempts to understand the relationship between two stories: the rape-revenge film and second-wave feminism. It is thus, in many ways, a response to the already existing account of this relationship given by Carol Clover in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*.<sup>2</sup> However, it is equally an

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).

attempt to make sense of my own relationship to feminism and, inasmuch, this latter story informs the former. The latter story is one that is characterized by a feeling of ‘in-betweenness’ and contradiction. Too young to have experienced at first hand the movement feminism of the 1970s, feminism for me has existed largely through the theoretical abstractions of the academy. The decline of movement feminism, however, has also meant that popular culture has become one of the primary realms in which feminism is now ‘lived’ and experienced by the majority of women including myself – as Jennifer Wicke has recently argued ‘the culture of celebrity is the material culture in which we have our being as feminists’.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, I have often been troubled by the gap between what I read and write as a feminist academic and my ‘lived’ experience of feminism and social practice, between the story of feminism I am told as an academic and the story I experience everyday as a consumer of popular culture, between feminism’s critique of popular culture as the site where normative femininities are constructed and the excited rush of recognition and identification a female avenger such as Catwoman in the film *Batman Returns* inspires. My interest in the rape-revenge film thus lies in the way in which it (and indeed, critical work about it) dramatizes and articulates some of the gaps and contradictions that concern me, particularly those between the ‘feminine’ (victim) and the ‘feminist’ (avenger) and between the popular and the political. As I will show, in the distinction it draws between feminist and feminine stories, ‘low’ and ‘high’ rape-revenge films, Clover’s analysis virtually reproduces these gaps. Yet, while the binary logic written into the very term ‘rape-revenge’ is itself suggestive of such contradictions and oppositions,

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Wicke, ‘Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93:4 (Fall 1994), 751-778 (p. 776).

the hyphen between the two words directs us towards the way in which these films can also be read as an attempt to bridge, and thus make sense of, these gaps.

During the course of this project I nevertheless spent much of my time leaping backwards and forwards across these gaps trying to ‘find’ feminism. But from wherever I stood it always seemed at one stage removed, was always just out of my grasp. It took me a while to realize that neither side of the divide represented the site of real, true, authentic feminism and that, in fact, in as far as *both* sides had produced my notion of what feminism was, ‘feminism’ was precisely in the very gap that troubled me. As Wicke points out: ‘Feminism is not exempt from celebrity material, and more and more, feminism is produced (or feminisms are produced) and received in the material zone of celebrity.’<sup>4</sup> This project thus arises in part out of frustration at the failure of feminism to address or acknowledge the way in which it inhabits that gap. It is for this reason that I now leap into this abyss and begin a process of archaeology, of excavation, not in an attempt to find some ‘authentic’ feminism but in order to unearth the way in which the meanings of feminism are produced through the cultural artefacts it has engendered. It is worth remembering, however, that like shattered pieces of pottery, these meanings are fragmented, some meanings will have been lost while those that remain will not always fit together to form a coherent whole. Moreover, some meanings will have migrated from the context in which they were originally produced, whilst others will be mixed together with fragments of meanings from different periods and discourses. I do not pretend to account for all the pieces or to fit them all together. Rather, I am looking for patterns among the fragments and the way in which, in attempting to make sense of feminism, they also produce understandings

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 754.



of feminism. In trying to understand those understandings and how they are produced, however, the act of critical analysis produces further understandings. ‘Talking and writing about texts’, as Jackie Byars has pointed out, ‘actively involves critics in the production and circulation of meanings – that is, in the construction of culture.’<sup>5</sup>

Cultural texts tell many different stories and, in negotiating a route through the text, the critic can only pretend to tell one of those stories. Like an archaeologist who attempts to understand how a culture is lived by unearthing its cultural artefacts and monuments, I am interested in unearthing how feminism is ‘lived’ and experienced through popular culture. As Sinfield argues: ‘Stories are *lived*. They are not just outside ourselves, something we read or hear about. They make sense for us – of us – because we have been and are in them.’<sup>6</sup> In this respect, I will largely be concerned with how texts generate everyday, common-sense meanings and popular understandings of feminism and especially the current pervasiveness of such meanings. Writing at a moment when Britain is in the grip of ‘Girl Power’ and claims that ‘the future is female’, as espoused by the British pop group The Spice Girls, I will be particularly concerned with exploring the way in which the story of second-wave feminism is being retold for the 1990s, with how the discourses of 1970s feminism are circulating and functioning in the popular texts of the 1990s, and with what this tells us about feminism past, present and future. Given the cultural pessimism that pervades many recent accounts of popular film as simply an articulation of a right-wing backlash against feminism, I will be giving specific consideration to the way in which contemporary Hollywood films might attempt to negotiate the competing and

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<sup>5</sup> Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 24.

often contradictory demands of the discourses of feminism and the discourses of the New Right.

The coincidence between the rise of second-wave feminism and the emergence of specifically *female*-centred rape-revenge films, together with the latter's representation of 'angry women' and engagement with perhaps *the* quintessential feminist issue, suggests that female rape-revenge films might provide the ideal site through which to pursue such an analysis. Whilst I recognize that these films are not necessarily the *only*, or indeed, the most *obvious*, way in which Hollywood can be seen to be making sense of feminism, their proliferation and increasing high-profile *throughout* this period means that they do represent a *coherent, popular* and *ongoing* site through which we can read the *changing* inscription of feminism in mainstream film and through which we can trace the significance of these changes. For example, in 1972 Helen Reddy's number one single 'I Am Woman (Hear Me Roar)' became one of anthems of the American Women's Liberation Movement. Twenty years later, in 1992, the song's title phrase reappeared in the film *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992) where Catwoman turns to the woman she has just saved from rape and proclaims 'I am Catwoman, hear me roar'. Similarly, in 1979, the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group pronounced that 'Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy'.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, these sentiments reappeared in the title of the film, *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991). However, neither film's engagement with such discourses was straightforward or unmediated. Rather, they represented a struggle between contradictory narrative and discursive levels, a

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<sup>7</sup> Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality', in *The Woman Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*, ed. by Mary Evans (London: Fontana, 1982), pp. 63-72 (p. 65).

struggle which, I will argue, can be read as an attempt to make sense of social and cultural change. *Batman Returns*, for example, presented us with the somewhat curious image of a pre-feminist incarnation articulating a feminist rallying cry in a supposedly post-feminist era, whilst *Sleeping with the Enemy* was structured so as to create a narrative lacuna around the very era its title evoked.

To the extent that cultural texts are founded on contradiction and struggle they also speak to, and help to make sense of, the contradictions in our lives. As Ien Ang has argued, they function to construct 'imaginary solutions for real contradictions'.<sup>8</sup> The majority of women's relationship to feminism has always been characterized by a sense of contradiction, a feeling often summarized in the phrase 'I'm not a feminist, but ...'. My interest in the rape-revenge film, and especially with 'erotic' female avengers such as Catwoman, thus lies in the way in which they speak to that feeling of 'in-betweenness' and contradiction, in the way in which, in particular, they 'live out' the contradiction between discursively constructed ideas of 'the feminine' and 'the feminist' and, in so doing, produce popularly available and accessible versions of feminism. This process is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Spice Girl Emma Bunton's articulation of this contradiction in her recent definition of 'Girl Power': 'I'm a feminist. But I could never burn my wonderbra.'<sup>9</sup> Of course, as Andrea Stuart points out, there is a disjunction between what this kind of popular feminism can supply and 'what women really need'.<sup>10</sup> However, as Christine Gledhill has argued:

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<sup>8</sup> Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> The Spice Girls, *Girl Power!* (London: Zone/Chameleon Books, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Stuart, 'Feminism: Dead or Alive?', in *Identity*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 28-42 (p. 40).



We need representations that take account of identities – representations that work with a degree of fluidity and contradiction – and we need to forge different identities – ones that help us make productive use of the contradictions in our lives. This means entering socio-economic, cultural and linguistic struggle to define and establish them in the media, which function as centres for the production and circulation of identity.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, we cannot afford to ignore the fact that we are living in a culture in which ideas about feminism and its history are as, if not more, likely to be gleaned from popular culture than from reading feminist theory. In as much, there is an increasingly urgent need for an analysis of this phenomenon and its implications for feminism.

Feminism's status as a story, the way in which it is imbricated in the forms and structures of popular culture is apparent in the way in which much recent feminist writing adopts the generic formulae of melodrama, with the writer often casting herself in the starring role. Margaret Walters, for example, has shown how the work of Catherine MacKinnon and Camille Paglia can be read as enacting a 'feminist melodrama' with MacKinnon playing the role of the puritanical good girl to Paglia's villainous bad girl.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Jennifer Wicke has demonstrated how, in her essay 'I'm for Tonya', the feminist writer and poet, Katha Pollitt, 'succumbs to the celebritizing

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<sup>11</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 72).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Walters, 'American Gothic: Feminism, Melodrama and the Backlash', in *Who's Afraid of Feminism?: Seeing through the Backlash*, ed. by Ann Oakley and Juliet Mitchell (London: Penguin, 1997), pp. 56-76.

of individual women as stock characters in a 'feminist melodrama'.<sup>13</sup> Suffice to say, all three occupy the sphere of celebrity or popular feminism and trade in simplified, common-sense meanings of feminism. For all three, then, the forms and structures of popular culture help generate these meanings, help to make sense of feminism.

Of course, it may be that feminism is, by its very nature, melodramatic. As Ien Ang has argued 'there is a fundamentally melodramatic edge to feminism':

After all, are not the suffering and frustration so eminently materialised in melodramatic heroines the basis for the anger conveyed in feminism? And does not feminism stand for the overwhelming desire to transcend reality – which is bound to be a struggle, full of frustrations and moments of despair? While the melodramatic heroine is someone who is forced to give up, leaving a yawning gap between desire and reality, the feminist is someone who refuses to give up, no matter how hard the struggle to close that gap might be.<sup>14</sup>

The problem, however, with the melodramatic model of feminism is that in attempting to transcend the gap between desire and reality, feminism creates another gap between the feminine victim 'who is forced to give up' and the feminist heroine 'who refuses to'. This represents another of the gaps that concerns me, one that is, moreover, dramatized again and again in the rape-revenge film's emphasis on the transformation of the heroine from victim to avenger. Indeed, what I want to suggest is that the

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<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Wicke, 'Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93:4 (Fall 1994), 751-778 (p. 765).

<sup>14</sup> Ien Ang, 'Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy', in *Television and Women's Culture: The Politics of the Popular*, ed. by Mary Ellen Brown (London: Sage, 1990), pp. 75-88 (pp. 87-88).

dramatization of this gap represents one of the primary ways in which the rape-revenge film can be seen to make sense of feminism.

As I have already suggested, however, the meanings of second-wave feminism are articulated not only *through* popular culture but in those critical texts that purport to analyse it (mine included). Furthermore, as Christine Gledhill has argued:

The critical act is not finished with the 'reading' or 'evaluation' of a text.

It generates new cycles of meaning production and negotiation –

journalistic features, 'letters to the editor', classroom lectures, critical

responses, changes in distribution or publication policy, more critical

activity, and so on. In this way traditions are broken and remade. Thus

critical activity itself participates in social negotiation of meaning,

definition, identity.<sup>15</sup>

Thus my readings of rape-revenge films and the understandings of feminism they produce are, in many respects, constructed against, and in response to, those put forward by Carol Clover.<sup>16</sup> What I want to argue, in particular, is that the version of feminism Clover's analysis produces is one in which femininity and feminine competencies are repressed or disavowed. This is not to say, however, that femininity is repressed in the films themselves but rather that it is the repressed of Clover's analysis. The most telling instance of this repression comes in Clover's discussion of *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981). Consider, for example, the following statement: 'the remainder of the film has Thana (*increasingly sexily dressed*) as a kind of *ultimate*

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<sup>15</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 74).

<sup>16</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).

*feminist vigilante* gunning down men who traffic in women'.<sup>17</sup> Why is the fact that Thana is 'increasingly sexily dressed' not only in parenthesis but unexplored in the rest of the analysis? I would suggest that the brackets operate as a form of disavowal. In other words, the sentence rests on the coexistence of two apparently incompatible terms (sexiness and feminism) and the parenthesis betrays Clover's belief that to claim Thana as 'a kind of ultimate feminist vigilante' necessitates a repression of her sexiness (indeed, the qualifying 'kind of' represents both an acknowledgement of, and an attempt to gloss over, the perceived contradiction). Similarly, in her introductory discussion of *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976), Clover admits that 'with its prom queens, menstrual periods, tampons, worries about clothes and makeup, *Carrie* would seem on the face of it the most feminine of stories'.<sup>18</sup> She swiftly moves on, however, to Stephen King's claim that it is also a feminist one. For Clover, then, the repression of the feminine story, her insistence on the 'masculinization' of the female victim-hero, is necessary in order for her to be able to tell her 'feminist' story of the male spectator's cross-gender identification.

Clover's feminist analysis also depends on drawing a distinction between underground and mainstream rape-revenge films, a distinction that also translates into an opposition between feminist and feminine and which therefore again necessitates the exclusion of the latter. Thus while the low-brow rape-revenge film is elevated to the status of a politicized avant-garde (consumed by male audiences), the mainstream version is implicitly analysed within a framework that condemns mass culture as a feminized and therefore depoliticized culture (consumed by 'normal', i.e. mixed

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141 (my emphasis).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.



audiences). For example, the kind of adjectives Clover uses to denigrate and exclude mainstream examples of the rape-revenge film betrays a belief that they are too 'feminine' to be feminist. In other words, they are variously described as 'civilized' (p. 147), 'pretty' (p. 150), 'safe' (p. 235), 'glossy' (p. 232), 'nice' (p. 20) and 'feel-good' (p. 147). The belief that feminism occludes femininity is not just peculiar to Clover or to academic analyses however. For example, popular reviews of recent rape-revenge films often suggested that the 'feminist' politics of such texts were compromised by their reliance on ideals of feminine beauty (*Bad Girls*) or the presence of heterosexual romance (*Thelma and Louise*).<sup>19</sup> In this way, then, academic analyses and popular reviews alike can be seen as sites where the orthodox feminist position on femininity and popular culture is repeatedly inscribed.

In attempting to produce an alternative account of the relationship between feminism, femininity and popular film, I have thus been forced to look beyond the theoretical orthodoxies of traditional feminist film theory to cultural studies and particularly to the theory of hegemony. In the hegemonic model of meaning production, as Christine Gledhill has observed, 'meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, as I argued earlier, cultural texts tell several different stories and, while the critic can only pretend to tell one of these stories, in so doing it not sufficient (as Clover does) to simply repress or disavow the presence of apparently contradictory or mutually exclusive stories since it

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<sup>19</sup> See for example:

Leslie Felperin Sharman, 'Bad Girls: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 4:7 (July 1994), 37-38.

'Daws', 'Thelma and Louise: Review', *Variety*, 13 May 1991.

<sup>20</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 68).

is in the very struggle between such stories that meaning is produced. What this suggests, then, is that the understandings of feminism the rape-revenge film produces are, in fact, crucially dependent on the way in which it negotiates the other 'stories' present in the text, *particularly* the feminine stories. As the 'repressed' of Clover's analysis, therefore, my analysis depends on putting the 'feminine' and the 'popular' back into play in order illuminate the processes of textual negotiation and struggle through which the rape-revenge film can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism. Contrary to Clover, then, I will argue that one of the primary ways in which it does this is precisely by addressing popular culture's repression of feminine stories or by retelling the stories popular culture has told about femininity. Within the sphere of popular culture, these stories are most clearly inscribed in genres or, as Charlotte Brunsdon has described them, 'mass cultural fictions of femininity'.<sup>21</sup> If we are to fully understand the significance of the feminist stories the rape-revenge film tells we must also seek to understand the way in which the films engage with, negotiate and rework these 'mass cultural fictions of femininity'. Indeed, insofar as feminism can be defined as involving a struggle over the meanings of femininity, it is in its ongoing articulation of these struggles that the rape-revenge film can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism.

Because by their very nature these struggles are dynamic, competing and often contradictory, this attempt to make sense of feminism is, however, never complete, the understandings of feminism produced never secure or fixed. Such an analysis thus goes some way towards explaining the endurance and mutability of the rape-revenge story,

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Pedagogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres', *Screen*, 32:4 (1991), 364-381 (p. 365). It is worth noting that Brunsdon is referring specifically to 'women's genres' here, but I think the description can be usefully extended to cover genre in general.

its continual retelling across a variety of different genres throughout the post-1970 period. It suggests, moreover, that we might need to reappraise or question accepted understandings of the 1990s as a period of post-feminism or backlash and particularly the fixed and unitary meanings such concepts tend to ascribe to feminism. In other words, the endurance of the rape-revenge film suggests that the stories it attempts to make sense of must themselves be understood as complex, changeable, problematic and ongoing rather than as 'authentic' singular or static moments. As Alan Sinfield observes: 'Notice how literary texts of any period return repeatedly to certain complex and demanding themes. This is because the stories that require most attention – most assiduous and continuous reworking – are the awkward, unresolved ones.'<sup>22</sup>

One of the main problems with Clover's generically specific model of the rape-revenge film is that, like much orthodox feminist film theory influenced by psychoanalysis, it is unable to adequately account for historical change, for either the endurance or the mutability of the rape-revenge story. In this model, the endurance of the story is understood simply in terms of the ahistorical and universal psychoanalytic concept of 'the repressed', whilst changes in the story are understood simply in terms of a decline from an original moment of authenticity.<sup>23</sup> Both explanations therefore tend to overlook the culturally and historically specific function of narratives and the way in which changes at their formal and thematic level are often indices of social change. Against Clover, then, I will be arguing that rape-revenge is not a sub-genre of horror, but a narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 37.

<sup>23</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 11.

1970s, has produced an historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films.<sup>24</sup> By showing how the meanings the rape-revenge film produces are generated from within an intricate matrix of shifting and contradictory discourses, the cyclic model will, I hope, help to produce a more subtle and sophisticated analysis of the changing inscription of feminism in popular film. Indeed, as Jackie Byars has argued: 'The general goal of feminist intervention is change, and theorizing change is crucial.'<sup>25</sup>

In endeavouring to trace the *changing* inscription of feminism in the rape-revenge cycle, then, I will be focusing in particular on the struggles and contradictions between these discourses or stories since, as Sinfield observes, it is in the competition between stories that social conflict and thus, by extension, social change manifests itself.<sup>26</sup> In order to isolate these conflicts and oppositions I will rely on a close textual analysis of - narrative and genre. However, while I will be concerned to explore how these contradictions are resolved, I will be equally, if not more, concerned to identify and explore ideological gaps, moments of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty, where negotiations around the meanings of feminism and femininity are at their most active. As I suggested earlier, one of the most obvious gaps the rape-revenge film opens up is that between the (feminine) victim and the (feminist) avenger and the way in which the films negotiate the transformation from one to the other will therefore be the focus of particular attention. Gaps are also apparent between the feminist stories the rape-

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<sup>24</sup> Clover's definition of the rape-revenge film as a sub-genre of horror also functions as one of the mechanisms through which she represses the feminine. In other words, existing theoretical paradigms demand that any attempt to tell a feminist story about the horror genre engage with the problem of the sadistic male gaze and thus with the 'masculine' story of the male spectator. Clover's project is thus to square the feminist story that has enabled the representation of a female victim-hero with the masculine story of the male spectator.

<sup>25</sup> Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 26.



revenge film can be seen to tell and the feminine stories inscribed in the genres it utilizes and these too will be the subject of specific analysis.<sup>27</sup> What I will argue is that these gaps represent what Christine Gledhill has called 'spaces of negotiation'.

Following Gledhill, my analysis of these spaces will offer 'not so much resistant readings, made against the grain, as animations of possibilities arising from the negotiations into which the text enters'.<sup>28</sup> These readings, however, will arise not simply from these textual negotiations but from my own theoretical negotiations, my own attempts to build bridges, to traverse the gaps between film studies and cultural studies, the textual and the contextual, the academic and the public, the theoretical and the popular, the feminist and the feminine.

Neither Clover or I doubt that the rape-revenge film tells a feminist story, what we offer, in negotiating different routes through the texts, is alternative versions of it. Moreover, the versions we offer can both be read as reactions to established aspects of the feminist story. Clover's version is a reaction to the story that feminist film theory has told about the male spectator, to its 'official denial' of cross-gender identification and to its assumption of woman's status as victim.<sup>29</sup> In as much, her work exists at the end of a paradigm shift, at the end of a 'cycle of meaning' to use Gledhill's phrase, inaugurated by Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure' in 1975.<sup>30</sup> This 'cycle' has been largely concerned with analysing the construction of femininity in

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<sup>27</sup> My use of the phrase 'feminist stories' here and elsewhere is not intended to imply that these films are actually '*feminist texts*' (although, as I argue below, there is, in fact, not such a thing 'as an intrinsically feminist text'). Rather, the phrase is intended as a shorthand for the 'stories *about* feminism' that these films can be seen to tell.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 87).

<sup>29</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 57-68.

popular texts. It is time, however, I think, that we applied the same kind of constructionist analysis to *feminism* itself. This would allow us to see that just as there is no innate, eternal essence to being a woman so too is there no innate, eternal essence to being a feminist. As Elizabeth Wilson has argued, feminists 'should not have to embody feminist virtues in the same way that western art for centuries has used the female form to represent uplifting abstract qualities'.<sup>31</sup> To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, then, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a feminist.' From this perspective, it does not matter whether popular texts are truly 'feminist' or not. Indeed, as Toril Moi argues: 'There is not, unfortunately, such a thing as an intrinsically feminist text: given the right historical and social context, all texts can be recuperated by the ruling powers – or appropriated by the feminist opposition.'<sup>32</sup> In other words, popular culture does not produce either purely dominant or purely oppositional meanings but is instead the site of contradiction where meanings are continuously contested and negotiated. Rather than futilely debating their relative 'feminist' worth, as the delegates at a recent conference did with The Spice Girls, we need to concern ourselves with how these texts make such debates *possible* and with what they can consequently tell us, not only about what it means to be female, but about what it means to be *feminist* in the 1990s. Just as these texts construct certain versions of femininity, so too do they construct certain versions of feminism – and it is here, therefore, as much as in the ivory towers of academia, that we can find, alongside the inevitable reactionary deployments, tentative and evolving formulations

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, 'Tell It Like It Is: Women and Confessional Writing', in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. by Susannah Radstone (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), pp. 21–45 (p. 21).

<sup>32</sup> Toril Moi, 'Feminist Literary Criticism', in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. by Ann Jefferson and David Robey, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: B.T. Batsford, 1986), pp. 204–221 (p. 220).

of what the future of feminism might be. As Jennifer Wicke has argued: 'The celebrity zone is the public sphere where feminism is negotiated, where it is now in most active cultural play.'<sup>33</sup>

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

In chapter 1, I will discuss at greater length my objections to existing analyses of the rape-revenge film, focusing specifically on the work of Carol Clover, and begin to flesh out in more detail an alternative approach. In particular, I will argue that the female avenger of the rape-revenge film has more in common with the violent woman of the erotic thrillers and neo-noirs of recent years than Clover's generically specific argument acknowledges. I will thus be situating Clover's work within the larger context of a burgeoning interest amongst feminist film theorists in these violent women. Against the tendency of both sets of analyses to distinguish the rape-revenge film from the erotic thriller or neo-noir, I will be developing an analysis which argues that both form part of an ongoing historically, rather than generically, specific cycle of films.

In line with my desire to give voice to the 'repressed' of Clover's work, the rest of the thesis will focus largely on those films Clover's analysis neglects – pre-1970 deployments of the rape-revenge structure and recent, mainstream articulations of the structure.<sup>34</sup> Chapter 2 will thus offer an analysis of *Sleeping with the Enemy*, one of the 'nice', 'glossy', 'safe' mainstream films Clover consigns to her 'Afterword'. Indeed, although *Sleeping with the Enemy* represents an example of a residual rather

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<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Wicke, 'Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93:4 (Fall 1994), 751-778 (p. 757).

<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps worth conceding here that, beyond the implication that they are too 'feminine' to be feminist, there are practical reasons for Clover's neglect of many of the recent, mainstream articulations of the rape-revenge structure I will be discussing. In other words, most of them had not been released at the time Clover was writing.

than a dominant deployment of the rape-revenge structure, this has the effect of foregrounding the ‘feminine’ discourses of romance and fairy-tales over which that structure is mapped, discourses which Clover’s analysis represses. Furthermore, I will show how this ‘back-to-front’ rather than chronological approach (starting at the end of both the rape-revenge cycle and Clover’s analysis, and with a residual rather than a dominant example of the structure) is also a structural feature of the film itself. My choice of *Enemy* is therefore also informed by a desire to complicate linear models of cultural and social development and the moments of authenticity such models tend to assume. Thus, while this film is in many ways unique, it can also be read as paradigmatic of the rape-revenge cycle as a whole and particularly of the way in which the cycle can be read as an attempt to make sense of feminism. Consequently, it is through my analysis of *Enemy* that the import of my arguments as a whole can be gauged.

The rest of the thesis is organized in an attempt to facilitate an understanding of rape-revenge as an historically, rather than generically, specific cycle of films and to enable an analysis of the changing inscription of feminism in that cycle. In chapter 3, I examine the deployment of the rape-revenge structure over a range of genres from the silent period to 1970. In so doing, I hope to show how the structure functioned in relation to the discourses of gender and genre in the period prior to the rise of second-wave feminism. In particular, while I will be arguing that these pre-1970 rape-revenge narratives, like their post-1970s counterparts, emerged at key points in the history of twentieth century gender relations, I will argue that, in the absence of the discourses of rape which emerged with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, these early articulations of the structure did not attempt to tell ‘feminist’ stories, or even feminine stories, but instead largely functioned to endorse and uphold the traditional



conceptions of masculinity and femininity inscribed in the genres over which it was mapped. For example, I will show how in these films rape is often cast as a threat to the feminine career of heterosexual romance and family. In other words, rape is frequently shown to result in the victim's rejection of this career and the threat this represents is apparent in the way in which these narratives work overtime to return the woman to her 'proper' place within the confines of the family and heterosexual relations. Even in those films in which rape can be seen to result *from* the heroine's rejection of her feminine vocation the trajectory and ideological work of the narrative is the same – to reposition the heroine as wife, fiancée or girlfriend. In this chapter, then, I will be examining the various narrative and generic strategies employed to bring about these 'narratives of transformation'.

In line with my claim that feminism is never available in a pure or unmediated form, and with my interest in the popular and publicly available meanings of feminism, chapter 4 will offer an analysis of the way in which feminism was constructed in reviews of the rape-revenge film. Focusing particularly on reviews of *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) and *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) I will argue that extra-textual material such as reviews play an important part in the construction of any particular text's meanings, particularly its dominant or preferred meanings. Traditionally, feminist analyses of mainstream texts have read 'against the grain' of these dominant or preferred meanings in order to produce resistant feminist readings. Here, however, I will read '*with* the grain' of these dominant meanings as they are inscribed in reviews of *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* in order to explore the ways in which they might produce popular, common-sense understandings of feminism. Against accepted understandings of the period in which these films were produced as one in which feminism was the subject of a right-wing backlash, I will

argue that feminism instead underwent a process of redefinition and negotiation, that this process was, in fact, a *part of* the wider hegemonic project of the New Right and that the meanings the reviews of *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* constructed were particularly illustrative of these processes. I will thus offer an analysis of these reviews as the discursive context for subsequent discussions.

Chapters 5 to 7 will therefore analyse the changing inscription of feminism in the rape-revenge cycle itself. The organization of these chapters is thus diachronic and roughly chronological, with each chapter focusing on a different generic deployment of the rape-revenge structure. Given my interest in the way in which the discourses of 1970s feminism are circulating and functioning in the 1990s, the emphasis will be largely on recent films, although I will also be concerned to trace differences and similarities in the generic work of these films and those I discussed in chapter 3. Chapter 5 thus offers a broad sweep through the period with an analysis of the way in which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped over that of the western. Starting from Pam Cook's observation that 'the frontier has often been seen in symbolic terms as a boundary between opposing ideas', I will argue that the rise of second-wave feminism demanded a fundamental realignment of these oppositions and thus of the myths or stories the western articulates.<sup>35</sup> My analysis will thus offer a continuation of Will Wright's structural analysis of the western.<sup>36</sup> In the first section of this chapter, then, I will trace the differences and similarities between two female rape-revenge westerns – *Hannie Caulder* (Burt Kennedy, 1971) and *Handgun* (Tony Garnett, 1982) – and Wright's 'vengeance variation'. In so doing, I will explore the extent to

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<sup>35</sup> Pam Cook, 'Women', in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. by Edward Buscombe (London: Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), pp. 240-243 (p. 241).

<sup>36</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

which the introduction of new functions such as the rape avenging woman brings about changes at the level of narrative structure, the oppositions it articulates and thus the meanings it generates. The second section of this chapter will look at a range of rape-revenge westerns from the 1990s and my analyses here will involve supplementing the preceding emphasis on the formal and thematic content of the texts themselves with an emphasis on the discourses surrounding them. In particular, I will argue that the rape-revenge film's move into the mainstream during this period has meant that the role played by stars such as Clint Eastwood and Sharon Stone has become increasingly significant to an analysis of the way in which these films articulate changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity and, by extension, to the way in which they produce a set of meanings around feminism. In so doing, I will begin to explore the extent to which popular understandings of the 1990s as a period of post-feminism and backlash are articulated in these films. Finally, I will also suggest that such an analysis must take account of the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics on genre, gender and the deployment of the rape-revenge structure.

Picking up on some of the issues discussed at the end of chapter 5, chapters 6 and 7 will focus on two different and apparently contradictory directions the rape-revenge cycle has taken in the 1990s, and on the different versions of the feminist story they have therefore produced. In chapter 6 I will explore the way in which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped over the codes and conventions of film noir in two neo-noirs of the period, *Batman Returns* and *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1993). Against the tendency to argue that the neo-noir articulates a contemporary backlash against feminism similar to that articulated by the classic film noir against women's changing status following the second world war, I will argue that such analyses fail to take into account those changes in the social, cultural and political context the pre-fix

‘neo’ should alert us to. Amongst these changes I will suggest that the rise of second-wave feminism and of specifically female-centred deployments of the rape-revenge structure, the emergence and influence of the New Right, and the shift from a modernist to a post-modern aesthetic, are the most significant. Consequently, I will argue that the post-modern articulation of the codes and conventions of film noir found in the neo-noir is not nostalgic. Instead, I will suggest that the neo-noir reconfigures those codes and conventions in a way that can be seen as both specific to, and an attempt to make sense of, our own current experience in the late twentieth century. In particular, I will argue that within the context of the yuppie ethos of the 1980s, in which upward-mobility, consumerism and acquisitiveness were not only emphasized, but legitimated, both the femme fatale’s transgressive greed and ambition and feminist desires to ‘have it all’ have been subject to reinterpretation. In my analysis of *The Last Seduction*, then, I will show how the negotiations that occur in the film between 1970s feminism and the 1980s culture of consumption, and between the codes and conventions of film noir and the rape-revenge structure, redefines feminism, particularly the archetypal feminist notion of ‘having it all’, according to the exigencies of the present moment. In the second half of the chapter, I will turn my attention to *Batman Returns* and explore how the film attempts to make sense of feminism within the context of increasing calls in the 1990s for a more morally restrained capitalism centred around family values. Anxieties about capitalism, I will suggest, are articulated in particular through the film’s deployment of the codes and conventions of the vampire narrative. Although the construction of Catwoman would seem to owe more to the femme fatale of film noir and the erotic female avenger of rape-revenge than to the female vampire, I will argue that these figures have more in common than might at first appear and that it is in the combination and negotiation of



these historically specific figurations of femininity that the film can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism past, present and future.

In chapter 7 I will analyse the erotic avenger's opposite number in the rape-revenge films of the 1990s – the maternal avenger. Given certain structural similarities between these maternal rape-revenge films and the 'vigilante-mom made-for-TV film' or 'trauma drama' analysed by Jane Feuer, I will start by exploring what happens to the feminist stories the rape-revenge structure can be seen to articulate when it meets the vigilante and familial politics of the trauma drama in the maternal rape-revenge films of the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, I will give particular consideration to Feuer's suggestion that 'when the trauma concerns women's issues' the politics of the trauma drama became less unambiguously right-wing.<sup>38</sup> In examining the extent to which the maternal rape-revenge film can be seen to conform to the structure and ideology of the trauma drama, I will also be concerned to evaluate Feuer's claim that it is the films which depart from the usual eight step plot structure that can be 'read against the grain of the more hegemonic films that contain all eight steps'.<sup>39</sup> Against Feuer, I will argue that, in the maternal rape-revenge film at least, the omission of crucial functions has the effect of tipping the balance of the films away from the politicized public solutions of the trauma drama towards the depoliticized private solutions of the domestic melodrama. In the second part of the chapter, therefore, I will engage in a close textual analysis of the way in which the maternal rape-revenge film deploys the codes and conventions of classic melodrama. In particular, I will show how the deployment of these codes and conventions work to construct the mother as 'guilty'

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42n14.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.

and thus to legitimate a backlash politics which demands women's return to the domestic sphere of home and family. Given the similarities between the ideological work of these films and those pre-second-wave feminist articulations of the structure discussed in chapter 3, I will suggest that, with the maternal rape-revenge film, the rape-revenge cycle has come full circle.

Following Gledhill's claim that 'the critical act is not finished with the "reading" or "evaluation" of a text', the conclusion will shift the focus from an analysis of the rape-revenge cycle's *textual* negotiation of feminism to a consideration of the various *theoretical* negotiations with feminism that have underpinned this analysis.<sup>40</sup> In so doing, I will assess the implications of my research for the future of feminist film theory, pedagogy and politics.

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<sup>40</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 74).

## APPENDIX TO THE INTRODUCTION

### A NOTE ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CORPUS

Texts were selected in an attempt to expand the definition of rape-revenge and, in particular, to illustrate the problems of defining rape-revenge as a sub-genre of horror. Thus, while texts were selected on the basis of whether they contained representations of rape and revenge, alongside texts which depicted literal rapes, texts were selected in which rape was symbolic (for example, *Broken Blossoms*), attempted (for example, *The Wind*) or in which rape was combined with more generalized domestic or sexual violence against women (for example, *Sleeping with the Enemy*). Texts were also selected in order to illustrate the various forms revenge may take, be it primary (revenge taken by the victim), secondary (revenge taken by someone other than the victim) or displaced (another man is made to suffer in the rapist's place; revenge is cast as self-defence). In expanding the definition of rape and revenge in this way, I hoped to explore the ideological consequences of these various figurations of rape and revenge. Texts were also selected in order to illustrate the breadth and diversity of the historical and generic contexts across which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped and thus to facilitate an analysis of rape-revenge as a generically diverse cycle of films. While the corpus is therefore representative insofar as it is illustrative of the main genres and historical moments across which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped, I do not pretend to have covered all examples of the rape-revenge structure. In particular, the thesis includes little extended discussion of examples of the rape-revenge structure from the 1970s. This is partly because of my interest in exploring how the rape-revenge cycle might be attempting to make sense of the contemporary feminist moment. However, it is also because many such examples have already been discussed at length by Carol Clover.

Although this project has evolved in part from a critique of Clover's work, it is also envisaged as a continuation and development of that work. For this reason, the corpus has been constructed so as cover those areas existing work on rape-revenge does not, especially pre-1970s deployments of the rape-revenge structure and recent, mainstream articulations of the structure. In addition, my project has been to explore how Hollywood has made sense of feminism and the corpus is therefore confined largely to deployments of the rape-revenge structure in American film. Within these parameters I have focussed on what I believe to be the most interesting and revealing examples.

### A NOTE ON TERMS

In many respects, the particular terms I have used to describe and define rape-revenge have been arrived at through a process of elimination, through deciding what rape-revenge was not. Thus rape-revenge was not a genre not only because it seemed to cut across genres, but because it lacked many of the elements used to define genres, such as a coherent iconography. Nor was it a movement since although, like rape-revenge, film movements as Janey Place observes 'occur in specific historical periods' and cut 'across genres',<sup>1</sup> unlike rape-revenge, film movements according to Silver and Ward 'are normally defined as a group of film-makers who share political and/or aesthetic beliefs and demonstrate a common stylistic approach'.<sup>2</sup> Nor was it simply a narrative trope or motif. Rather, rape-revenge seemed to me to constitute a clear, though somewhat primitive, example of a narrative structure. Whilst traditionally structural analyses of narrative have been more detailed and elaborate (Propp, for example, identified thirty-one narrative events and seven spheres of

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<sup>1</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67 (pp. 37-39).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, 'Introduction', in *An Encyclopedic Reference Guide to Film Noir*, ed. by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1980), pp. 1-6 (p. 3).



action in the Russian fairy-tale), rape-revenge was clearly understandable in these terms. In other words, rape-revenge can be seen as constituting a sequence of narrative events (rape, transformation, revenge) occurring in a particular order, combined with a specific set of character functions or spheres of action (victim, rapist, avenger). Understanding rape-revenge in this way facilitates a close analysis not only of narrative events, character functions and the relationships between them, but of what happens when the structure is mapped across the codes, conventions and narrative structures of specific genres. It also enables an exploration of the extent to which variations in the structure might be historically determined, particularly the way in which character functions such as that of the female avenger might be redefined by the historical context in which they appear. Structure alone, however, did not seem adequate to the task of explaining the way in which deployments of the rape-revenge structure seemed to cohere in the post-1970 period, suggesting that another term was needed to describe what happens when the rape-revenge structure meets the discourses of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. In particular, a term was needed which not only described the historical specificity and generic diversity of deployments of the rape-revenge structure in this period, but which countered the evaluative narrative of decline from an authentic or classic moment written into much genre criticism. Of the available terms, 'cycle' seemed to me to best describe the ephemeral and transitional nature of rape-revenge, seemed to best facilitate a discussion of its historical specificity and of the ideological significance of shifts and differences in the various deployments of the structure. Consequently, rape-revenge seemed most usefully understood as a narrative structure which, on meeting the discourses of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced an historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films.

## CHAPTER 1

### NARRATIVES OF TRANSFORMATION: THE RAPE-REVENGE CYCLE

The previously neglected rape-revenge film has, in part at least, been the subject of two recent publications: Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chainsaws* and Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine*.<sup>1</sup> Despite differing significantly in terms of approach, both works do share certain similarities. Both situate the rape-revenge film firmly within the horror genre (which forms the larger context of both works) and both are informed by a desire to deconstruct the assumption, fixed by previous critical approaches, that the genre casts women as passive victims and men as monsters or saviours (a project which involves a concomitant questioning of another 'given' of psychoanalytic film criticism – the sadism of the male sPECTORIAL position). Finally, both use as their main paradigm the 1977 film *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi). But while Creed recasts the female character, Jennifer (Camille Keaton), as the *femme castratrice* (one of the seven 'faces' of the monstrous-feminine), Clover recasts Jennifer as the 'female victim-hero'. In this chapter, then, I will outline in some detail my objections to these analyses of the rape-revenge film and begin to map out an alternative approach. This will involve situating Clover and Creed's work within the larger context of a burgeoning interest amongst feminist film theorists in representations of violent and vengeful women.

Many of the problems inherent in Clover's approach primarily stem from issues related to genre. As Christine Gledhill points out: 'While the existence of the major

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).

Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

genres is in some ways a self-evident fact, the business of definition and demarcation is less clear-cut.<sup>2</sup> Clover attempts to side-step such problems by claiming that:

It has not been my concern to define horror or to adhere to the definitions of others [...]. I have been guided for the most part by video rental store categorizations, which [...] seem to capture better than any definition I know what the public senses to be 'horror'.<sup>3</sup>

Her categorization of American horror of the 1970s to mid 1980s is therefore, by her own admission, 'somewhat loosely' defined. While I have no argument with Clover's definition of slasher and occult/possession films as examples of horror, both she and I have more problems yoking the rape-revenge film to the genre and she is thus constantly forced into making qualifications to her arguments:

Although *Deliverance* is commonly taken less as horror than as a 'literary' rumination on urban masculinity, its particular rendition of the country-city encounter has been obviously and enormously influential in horror – so much so that it is regularly included in cult horror lists.<sup>4</sup>

and:

A number of the rape-revenge films I viewed in connection with this chapter are categorized in video rental stores under 'action' or

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Genre', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 58-64 (p. 59).

<sup>3</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 5n5.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 126.

‘suspense’. Production values, not just subject matter, play a role in the perception of genre. High-budget forms are likely to be categorized as drama, suspense, or action and low-budget forms as horror or cult – even when the plots are virtually identical.<sup>5</sup>

What these points belie is *precisely* a process of definition. In other words, for a rape-revenge film to be ‘horror’ and therefore to fit into Clover’s thesis it must be both low-budget and work on the city-country axis. To my knowledge this rules out virtually every (female-centred) rape-revenge film except *I Spit on Your Grave* which, significantly, is the one to which Clover gives the most detailed attention. Indeed, Clover’s attempt to differentiate the horror film from the action film, and to explain the former’s preference for a *female* victim-hero over the latter’s preference for a *male* victim-hero on the basis of horror’s greater emphasis on the victim part of the story, forces her into another qualification (again significantly tucked away in the footnotes) that ‘the subgenre of horror that most closely approximates the suffering-revenge proportions of the male action film is the rape-revenge film’.<sup>6</sup> This, along with her other qualifications, would seem to suggest that rape-revenge is simply not assimilable to the horror genre. However, instead these qualifications are used as a defining principle by which those films that might contradict Clover’s thesis, while used to set up the initial problematic, are successfully ruled out of the final argument (single male-female axis rape-revenge films, high-brow rape-revenge films, ‘action’ or ‘suspense’ rape-revenge films). Consequently, many significant features of the rape-

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153n39.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18n34.



revenge film go unaddressed and unexplained, together with its predecessors and successors in the filmic world.

Such an approach is, for example, simply unable to account for the variations and developments that become apparent from even a cursory glance at various rape-revenge films. Rape-revenge, for example, is not generically specific since, as a sequence of narrative events, it quite clearly spans a whole range of genres from the western (*Hannie Caulder*) to the erotic thriller or neo-noir (*The Last Seduction*), from melodrama (*In My Daughter's Name*, Jud Taylor, 1992) to the detective genre (*Sudden Impact*, Clint Eastwood, 1983), and from courtroom drama (*The Accused*) to, in rare cases, science fiction (*The Handmaid's Tale*, Volker Schlöndorff, 1990). Some films, on the other hand, appear to cover several genres at once. *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1990), for example, simultaneously draws on melodrama, film noir and the detective genre. In addition, in some instances rape-revenge forms the primary structure of the film (as in *I Spit on Your Grave*) whilst in others it is merely part of a larger narrative structure (as in *Showgirls*, Paul Verhoeven, 1995) or is given a self-conscious postmodern inflection (as in *The Last Seduction* or *Batman Returns*). What this suggests, I think, is that rape-revenge is best understood not as a genre, but as a narrative structure which has been mapped onto and across not only a whole range of genres, but a whole range historical and discursive contexts. Thus examples of the structure can be found in films from the silent period – for example *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), *The Wind* (Victor Seastrom, 1928) and *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929) through to the present day – for example *Eye for an Eye* (John Schlesinger, 1995) and *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, 1996). The rape-revenge structure, however, has received perhaps its most widespread dissemination in the post-1970 period and I will thus be arguing that the confluence between the rape-

revenge structure and the discourses of second-wave feminism which emerged during this period has produced an historically specific, but generically diverse, cycle of films.

Indeed, as Clover herself points out, in yet another qualification: 'Revenge dramas are by no means the sole property of horror; vengeance may very well be the mainspring of American popular culture.'<sup>7</sup> Yet if this is the case, the question that surely needs to be asked is 'where is the horror in *rape*-revenge?' or 'what makes *rape*-revenge horror and other revenge dramas not?'. It is at this point that Clover's reliance on popular definitions becomes particularly problematic and at which *some* reference to the genre criticism and definitions she so studiously avoids clearly becomes necessary. Whilst recognizing the problems associated with the definition of genres, I would agree with Robin Wood that one of the core characteristics of horror is that 'normality is threatened by the Monster'.<sup>8</sup> This also conforms with Stephen Neale's argument that genres do not consist of exclusive elements but of exclusive combinations of elements and of the weight given to those elements.<sup>9</sup> The presence of a monster (or a threat to normality, an abnormal person) may be, but is rarely, an optional element in other genres, but in horror it plays a specific and distinctive role, its presence is essential. The question then arises 'where is the monster in rape-revenge?'. As Clover herself points out the rapists in *I Spit on Your Grave* 'are not odd specimens but in the normal range of variation; their acts of brutal rape are not traced to dysfunctional upbringing', a point which actually contradicts her later assertion that such country people are indeed highly abnormal, a 'people not like us'

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film', in *Movies and Methods Volume II: An Anthology*, ed. by Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 195-220 (p. 203).

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980).

but a 'threatening rural Other'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the "normalization" of the rapist' is later characterized as a feature of the films as a whole.<sup>11</sup> Are we then to assume that it is the concomitant "masculinization" of the rape victim' that is the threat to normality?<sup>12</sup> This would seem to be what Clover is suggesting when she claims that in her definition of the female victim-hero 'the hero part [is] always understood as implying some degree of monstrosity'.<sup>13</sup> However, although her analysis of Stephen King's remarks about *Carrie* cause her to ask the question 'If "women's liberation" is the fear, is Carrie its representative monster?' it is one that is never satisfactorily addressed or answered.<sup>14</sup> Instead, she prefers to argue that Carrie's status as a female victim-hero has been enabled by women's liberation and that *Carrie* and subsequent films therefore articulate a feminist politics (although even here she tends to equivocate, her comments often qualified with the inclusion of an ambivalent 'for better or worse').<sup>15</sup> Moreover, while Carrie's 'supernatural' powers place her firmly within the realm of horror and the monstrous, the rape-avenging woman is less obviously assimilable to the role of 'monster'. Nevertheless, the possibility that these films articulate anxieties about feminism is one that is worth pursuing but which is not exclusive to the horror genre. As Doane argues in relation to film noir, the femme fatale is 'not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism'.<sup>16</sup> What this points to is not horror and its monsters but a wider cultural process of

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<sup>10</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 119 and p. 124 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 64 and p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.

demonization which, like the revenge motif is not 'the sole property of horror' but informs a wide cross-section of genres. In chapters 6 and 7, then, I will be exploring the extent to which specific generic deployments of the rape-revenge structure can be read as articulations of the backlash against feminism it is widely agreed occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s.

As the equivocations and qualifications in Clover's argument suggest, she is at least partially aware of these problems but in a sense turns them to her own advantage in an impressive and persuasive discussion of horror's, or more specifically the city-country rape-revenge film's appropriation and transformation of elements from another genre, the western. Whilst fascinating, such a reading can only explain the work of three rape-revenge films (*I Spit*, *Deliverance* and *Hunter's Blood*), only a small proportion of those that Clover catalogues and her arguments in relation to the significance of Jennifer in *I Spit* are therefore not always transferable to other female rape-revenge films. For example, her claim that the rape-revenge film and the slasher film tell similar gender stories in that feminine males are set against and finally overpowered by masculine females only works on the city-country axis since, for males to be 'feminized', they must be country males who have been 'fucked' by city interests.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Clover's arguments about the city-country rape-revenge film's similarities with the western would simply seem to support my contention that rape-revenge is not a genre but a narrative structure which has been mapped over other genres to produce an historically specific, but generically diverse, cycle of films. In chapter 5,

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<sup>17</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 162.



then, I will offer my own analysis of the way in which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped over the western genre.

The parallel with the western also points to another way in which the arguments Clover so persuasively put forward about slasher are not so easily transferable to rape-revenge. As I have been trying to suggest, while I have no argument with the definition of slasher as an example of horror, rape-revenge is less easily assimilable to the genre and the parallels with the western, in some respects, only serve to point this up. In other words, while the world of slasher lacks a social and historical context and therefore has little basis in reality, both the western and the rape-revenge film can be related to historical and social contexts and developments (American frontier history and the rise of second-wave feminism respectively) and have referents in the real world (for example, women's very real experience of rape). Of course, one may want to argue, as Clover does, that 'the notion of women going around New York putting bullets through male chauvinists has everything to do with fantasy and little to do with reality' and that it is therefore the revenge part of the drama that constitutes the horror.<sup>18</sup> However, one could also argue that these films actually represent an attempt to make sense of a reality in which radical feminists such as Valerie Solanis advocate the 'cutting up of men' and in which there are much publicized instances of women killing violent husbands (Sara Thornton) and castrating unfaithful ones (Lorena Bobbitt). In fact, as the legal consequences of Thornton's and Bobbitt's actions imply, Clover's charge of 'Pollyannaism' to *The Accused's* implication that 'the story is over when the men are sentenced' could equally be applied to the 'aftermathless' ending of

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 142.

*I Spit*.<sup>19</sup> What these points suggest then are some reasons why the theories which worked so well for slasher do not so easily apply to rape-revenge. Indeed, some of the inconsistencies and ambivalence in Clover's arguments perhaps stem from the uneasy and never fully resolved alliance between socio-historical perspectives and psychoanalytical perspectives.

For example, Clover's reliance on an ahistorical psychoanalytic analysis prevents her from seeing the discourses of genre and gender as anything other than fixed or static. Clover's analysis of the transformations that occur within and across the rape-revenge film thus does not allow for the complex temporality of the discursive formations in which the rape-revenge film has been produced and developed.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Clover offers a teleological account of the rape-revenge film's evolution. In other words, she argues that the rape-revenge film's move into the mainstream has been enabled by earlier, 'low' versions of such films and that this transformation has been accompanied by a concomitant erosion of their progressive politics. In its implication that there was a moment of authenticity that has now passed, Clover's argument installs the low budget horror film as the site of the 'true' rape-revenge film from which mainstream or other generic examples are excluded and, in so doing, obviates any need to consider or account for changes in the cultural or political context. In attempting to offer an alternative account of the rape-revenge cycle's politics and evolution I will be focussing largely on these absences and gaps in Clover's analysis: the recent, mainstream, deployments of the rape-revenge structure and the cultural and political context in which they were produced and consumed. In

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149 and p. 118 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Clover, 'High and Low: The Transformation of the Rape-Revenge Movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 76-85.

so doing, I will be giving particular consideration to two key contextual developments: the emergence of the New Right during the 1980s and the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics on Hollywood film. In exploring the impact of post-modernism on the evolution of the rape-revenge cycle and on the way in which specific generic deployments of the structure negotiate their social and political context, my arguments will be informed, in particular, by the work of Jim Collins on ‘genericity in the nineties’.

Collins starts by pointing out that the traditional three-stage model of generic progression and decline – consolidation, variation and collapse into self-parody or reflexivity – is simply unable to account for recent developments in genre.<sup>21</sup> These developments, he argues, have been largely brought about by the advent of new technologies such as television and video and the subsequent growth in media literacy amongst consumers. However, the increasing availability of texts from the past brought about by these new technologies has, he claims, resulted neither in decline (generic exhaustion) or progression (a fourth stage) but a ‘renaissance’ phase in which texts from the past are increasingly being ‘recycled’ in the present. According to Collins this ‘recycling’ manifests itself in two different ways. The first, ‘eclectic irony’, is ‘founded on dissonance, on eclectic juxtaposition of elements that very obviously don’t belong together’ and ‘involves an ironic hybridization of pure classical genres’.<sup>22</sup> Here, then, the features of conventional genre films are not simply recycled but rearticulated. They do not, in other words, represent ‘the mere detritus of exhausted cultures past’. Rather

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<sup>21</sup> Jim Collins, ‘Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity’, in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 242-263.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

those icons, scenarios, visual conventions continue to carry with them some sort of cultural “charge” or resonance that must be reworked according to the exigencies of the present. The individual generic features then, are neither detritus nor reliquaries, but *artifacts* of another cultural moment that now circulate in different arenas, retaining vestiges of past significance reinscribed in the present.<sup>23</sup>

The second form of genericity, ‘the new sincerity’, on the other hand, is ‘obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony, where everything works in unison’ and consequently ‘rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of a lost purity’.<sup>24</sup> Texts in this category tend use an originary genre text in order to facilitate and guarantee a ‘move back in time [...] toward a lost authenticity’ in which the unresolvable problems of the present can be magically resolved in an imaginary and unrecoverable past.<sup>25</sup> Thus genre films of the late 1980s and 1990s either purposely confuse time and genre (eclectic irony) or attempt to construct ‘an impossible temporality’ (the new sincerity).<sup>26</sup> The way in which both these forms of genericity confuse linear notions of time by recycling traditional genre texts therefore not only militates against conventional accounts of generic development, but complicates conventional understandings of the way in which texts negotiate their cultural and social context:

The fact that the old is not replaced by the new anymore does not just change the historical development of specific genres, it also changes the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 262.



function of genre films, which, if they can still be said to be engaged in symbolically “mapping” the cultural landscape, must do so now in reference to, and *through* the array that constitutes that landscape.<sup>27</sup>

This clearly has profound implications for the way in which we trace the transformations in the articulation of gender and genre both within and across the rape-revenge narrative. In other words, the complex temporalities of genre complicate linear notions of time and history, such that analysing the way in which the rape-revenge film attempts to make sense of feminism will involve rejecting any simple notions of a narrative of progression (or, indeed, decline). Indeed, if the 1990s has witnessed an increasing cultural literacy concerning the discourses of genre, it has also witnessed an increasing circulation and popularization of specifically feminist derived discourses of gender, as evidenced by the unprecedented book sales enjoyed by feminist authors such as Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf and Camille Paglia. However, as with the discourses of genre we need to guard against reading these discourses either as a narrative of progression or as a narrative of decline.<sup>28</sup> With regard to the former, Imelda Whelehan has observed that ‘the “new” feminism of the ‘90s, exemplified by writers such as Wolf, is [...] not altogether “new” in its insights’,<sup>29</sup> whilst Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips have warned against ‘the simplistic teleology of assuming

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>28</sup> As Denise Riley has observed: ‘Equality; difference; “different but equal” – the history of feminism since the 1790s has zigzagged and curved through these incomplete oppositions upon which it is itself precariously erected. This swaying motion need not be a wonder, nor a cause for despair. If feminism is the voicing of “women” from the side of “women”, then it cannot but act out the full ambiguities of that category.’ *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 220.

that later theory is therefore better theory'.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, we need to be equally wary of the narrative of decline implied by the term 'post-feminism'. As Charlotte Brunsdon has pointed out, current usages of the term not only tend to install '1970s feminism as the site of "true" feminism, from which lipstick wearers and shoppers are excluded' but tend to reduce 'all feminisms, and their long histories, to that one 1970s movement'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, against Clover, I want to suggest that the rape-revenge structure, and the discourses of genre and gender over which it has been mapped, are best understood not as producing fixed meanings or authentic 'moments', but as 'narratives of transformation'.

For example, against a fixed binary logic which sees the rape-revenge structure as *always already* gendered, and therefore as merely facilitating a movement from the 'feminine' (rape) to the 'masculine' (revenge), I will be arguing that the transformations that occur both within and across the rape-revenge film are not a product of the rape-revenge *structure*, but of the tensions and contradictions both within and between the discursive narratives of transformation over which that structure is deployed. In representing and articulating these tensions and contradictions the various deployments of the rape-revenge structure in turn produce *negotiated* versions of these narratives of transformation. Thus, the rape-revenge narrative is not a simple reflection of its discursive context, but an active attempt to make sense of it. Moreover, since this context is constantly shifting, so too are the meanings the structure generates. The resulting narratives are not therefore inert but

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<sup>30</sup> Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, 'Introduction', in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. by Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 1-9 (p. 7).

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 102.

themselves become the sites on, through and against which the discursive formations that produced them are subsequently constructed and transformed. Any attempt to understand the changing inscription of feminism in these narratives, the way in which they articulate 'feminist' narratives of transformation, must therefore involve a close analysis of the diverse ways in which the rape-revenge structure has engaged with and expressed the often competing and opposing demands of the discourses of gender and genre across which it has been mapped. In addition, where the rape-revenge structure is mapped over more than one genre consideration will also need to be given to the effects produced by the intersection of conflicting generic discourses.

The problems I have identified in Clover's approach, especially the difficulties inherent in her privileging of the double-axis over the single-axis and the low-budget over the high-budget rape-revenge film, become particularly apparent in her analysis of specific films. For example, in Clover's discussion of a single-axis film, *Ms. 45*, the 'discussion' largely takes the form of a plot summary and there is little or no analysis or interrogation of the significance of her observations. For example, as I pointed out in the introduction, Clover's observation that in the revenge part of the narrative Thana is 'increasingly sexily dressed' is not only unexplored in the rest of the analysis, it is considered so insignificant that it is put in parenthesis.<sup>32</sup> Similarly unexplored (and also in parenthesis) is the observation that in her final rampage Thana is 'dressed as a nun'.<sup>33</sup> Clover concludes this plot summary with the claim that 'what the male spectator's stake is in [the revenge] fantasy is not clear'.<sup>34</sup> Her tentative suggestion

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<sup>32</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 141.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

that this might have something to do with ‘the abnegation of male responsibility in matters of sexual violence’, and her firmer claim that the male spectator’s engagement in the revenge drive is predicated on cross-gender identification, both rest on the “‘masculinization” of the rape victim’.<sup>35</sup> However, what this fails to take into account, and what Clover’s observations about *Ms. 45* gloss over, is the frequent ‘eroticization’ of the avenging woman. Indeed, one of the most memorable instances in *Ms. 45* is a below the waist shot of Thana, nun’s habit pulled up to reveal a stockinged leg into which is inserted her gun, and this highly erotic image surely plays on a whole range of male sexual fantasies. Thus the idea that male spectorial pleasure lies in identification is too often unproblematically assumed in Clover’s analysis:

The success among young male audiences of single-axis films like *Ms. 45* makes it clear that narrative and cinematic positioning can in themselves go a long way in insuring sympathy with the humiliation and rage of a raped person.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, the process of eroticization radically compromises this reading of the rape-revenge film as telling a story of cross-gender identification, and it is perhaps for this reason it is repressed in Clover’s analysis. As I argued in the introduction, however, Clover’s disavowal of eroticization can also be seen as arising from a more deep-seated conviction that sexiness is inimical to the feminist story she is seeking to tell about the rape-revenge film. In so doing, Clover’s analysis betrays a belief that in order to claim a text as ‘feminist’ it must reflect such feminist orthodoxies. Yet as

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 152 and pp. 143-144 respectively.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 163-164.



Pam Cook has argued: 'The quest for feminism in popular texts is [...] self-defeating, in the sense that these texts produce popular versions of feminism, rather than reproduce an "authentic" feminist politics.'<sup>37</sup> In reinscribing the erotic female avenger as a central figure within the rape-revenge cycle, I will thus be particularly concerned to trace the way in which she functions in the construction of these popular versions of feminism.

In fact, the issue of eroticization seems to me one of the central ways in which the slasher film and the rape-revenge film differ. It thus represents another of the reasons why Clover's arguments about slasher are not transferable to rape-revenge. In other words, in slasher the role of the final girl is predicated on her being both dowdy and virginal, whilst rape-revenge is frequently either peopled with beautiful actresses – Raquel Welch in *Hannie Caulder*, Margaux Hemingway in *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976), Sondra Locke in *Sudden Impact*, Farah Fawcett in *Extremities* (Robert M. Young, 1986) – or involves a transformation in which the initially rather plain rape-victim is transformed into a deadly but irresistible femme fatale – Thana (Zoë Tamerlis) in *Ms. 45* and Bella (Lia Williams) in *Dirty Weekend* (Michael Winner, 1992). Furthermore, if Clover's initial selection procedure was guided by video 'box covers (screaming women, poised knives, terrified eyeballs)', then the erotic depiction of the female avenger on the video box covers and publicity material for many rape-revenge films (*including I Spit*) should have alerted her to these differences (see figures 1 - 5, pp. 41 - 44).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Pam Cook, 'Outrage', in *Queen of the 'B's: Ida Lupino Behind the Camera*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), pp. 57-72 (p. 70).

<sup>38</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 19.



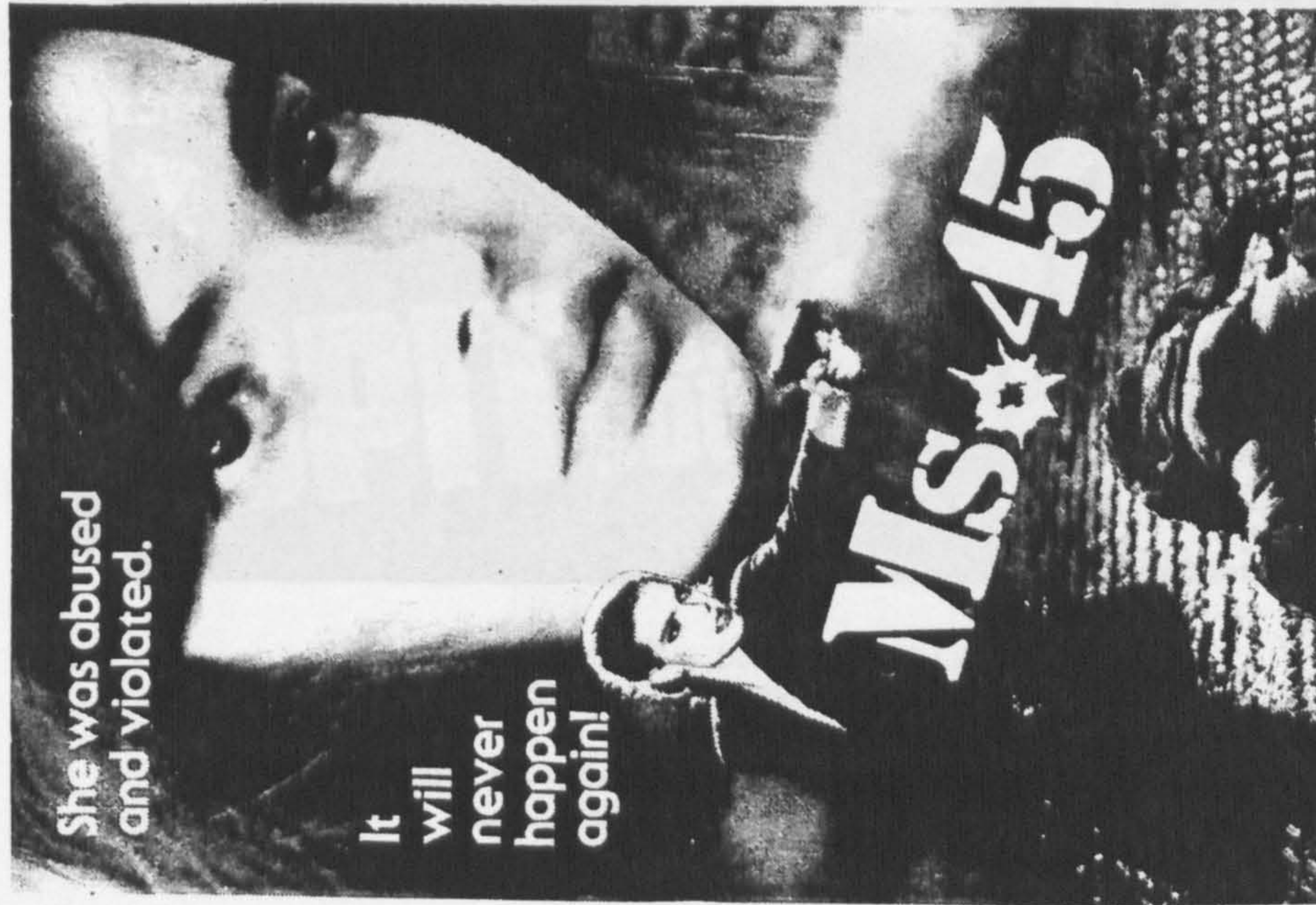


Figure 1

Publicity posters for *Ms. 45*. Figure 2 also featured on the video box cover of the film.

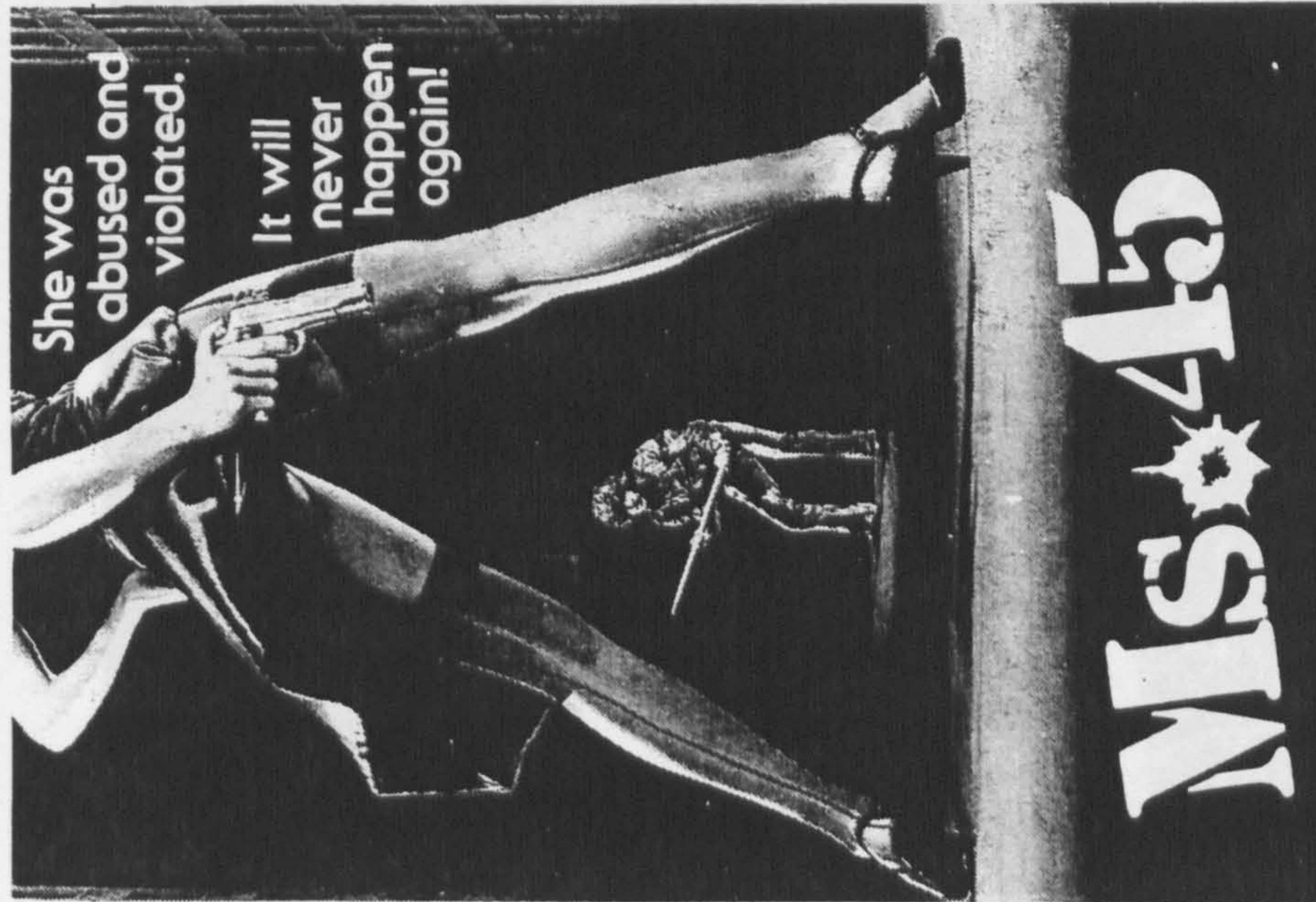


Figure 2



**THIS WOMAN HAS JUST  
CUT, CHOPPED, BROKEN, and BURNED  
FIVE MEN BEYOND RECOGNITION...**

**BUT NO JURY  
IN AMERICA  
WOULD EVER  
CONVICT HER!**

# **I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE**

**...AN ACT OF  
REVENGE**

JERRY GROSS presents "I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE"  
A CINEMAGIC PICTURES PRODUCTION  
A MEIR ZARCHI FILM

Starring

CAMILLE KEATON • ERON TABOR • RICHARD PACE • ANTHONY NICHOLS

produced by JOSEPH ZBEDA • written & directed by MEIR ZARCHI

DISTRIBUTED BY THE JERRY GROSS ORGANIZATION Color By METROCOLOR •

**R**

RESTRICTED  
UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING  
PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN

Figure 3: Publicity poster for *I Spit on Your Grave*



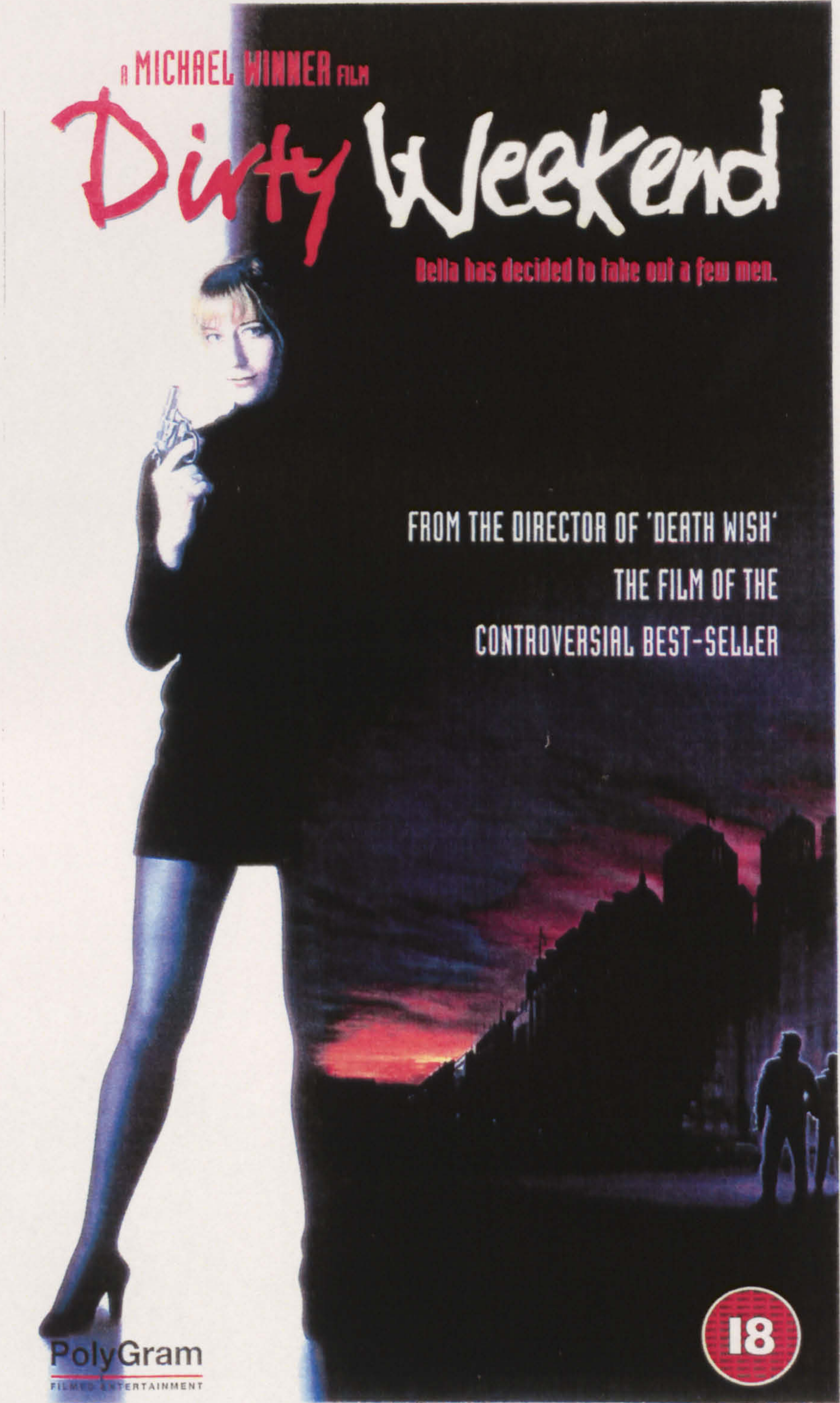


Figure 4: Video box cover for *Dirty Weekend*



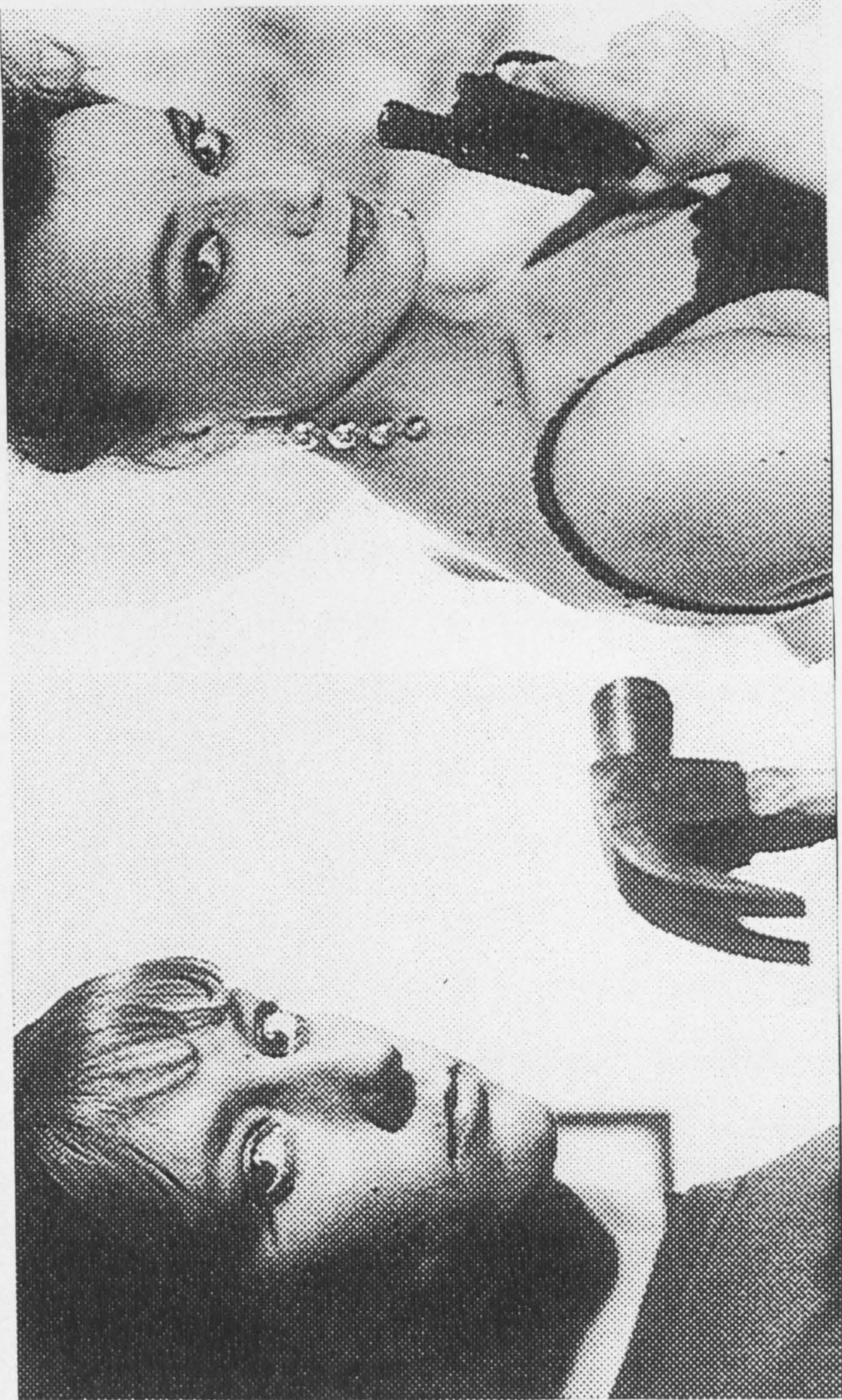


Figure 5: Publicity stills for *Dirty Weekend*



The similarities between the erotic female avenger and the femme fatale suggest, moreover, that, while the origins of the rape-revenge structure *do* lie in the horror genre, they go back much further than the relatively recent slasher sub-genre. As I will argue in chapter 6, the femme fatale emerged as a key representational figure in the nineteenth century and the inspiration for these representations can be traced largely to the vampire narratives that had circulated widely since the publication of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819. Indeed, as I will go on to demonstrate in chapter 6, the similarities between the rape-revenge film and the vampire story extend beyond the level of representation to the level of narrative structure and ideology. In particular, I will show how vampirism, like rape, represents a violent sexual act which has similar effects on the subsequent representation and narrative trajectory of its female victim. Finally, I will argue that the female vampire (particularly as she is figured in the ultimate vampire narrative – Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and in the 1970s cycle of lesbian vampire films) emerges at key points in the history of feminism (the 1890s and the 1970s) and thus, like the female avenger, can be read as an attempt to make sense of the spectre of the 'New Woman' and a gathering women's movement.

Clover's reliance on popular definitions of genre (video box covers, video shop classifications, cult horror lists) and audience seem to stem from her own situation of herself as 'something of a fan'.<sup>39</sup> In a sense her own implication of herself in the pleasures of popular culture is refreshing and the intellectual as fan is certainly a position which is acknowledged and endorsed within the discipline of cultural studies.

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

However, like a fan there is a sense in which Clover feels the need to defend her pleasure and this leads her into a argument in which high-brow films are compared to low-brow films and found wanting (Clover's allegiance to low-brow films is evident in her claim that she originally intended to concentrate on such films). Nevertheless, as cultural studies has repeatedly pointed out, the reverse of this argument (that low culture is rubbish and therefore not worthy of serious attention) is inherently fruitless, and I am not therefore convinced that what is essentially a reformulation of this approach in Clover (privileging low over high) is particularly productive. This is especially apparent in Clover's discussion of *The Accused* where the analysis is divided into 'virtues' and 'problems', but with the emphasis placed squarely on the problems. For example, Clover's major criticism is that although the film brings male gazing to account (through the charge of criminal solicitation) this is itself achieved through a *male spectator* (Ken) and it is his testimony, rather than the rape victim's, which is given the status of truth. However, in Clover's rush to condemn this aspect of the film she over looks a couple of salient points. Firstly, that we are repeatedly told that male gazing (simply watching a rape) and criminal solicitation (encouraging a rape) are not the same thing and secondly, that Katheryn (Kelly McGillis) tells Sarah (Jodie Foster) that the jury want to see Ken's testimony again and not her's because 'they believe you'. More to the point, given Clover's emphasis on the fluidity of gender identity and cross-gender identification, is her surprising insistence on Ken's 'maleness'. In fact, the film seems to me to go to some lengths to code Ken (Bernie Coulson) as 'feminine'. For example, Ken openly admits that, like Sarah, he too is 'scared' and Katheryn comments in her summing up that Ken is 'especially sensitive'. Most notable, however, given Clover's emphasis on the significance of names, is the fact that Sarah's surname is in fact a boy's name (Tobias) and Ken's is a girl's name

(Joyce). Indeed, Clover's desire to condemn the film on the basis that the legal system, rather than the rape victim, becomes the hero of the piece overlooks the fact that the film does represent and comment on female violence as a form of revenge (Sarah's ramming of a spectator's car) and that this sequence significantly appears immediately after Sarah has undergone a symbolic 'masculinization' (the sequence in which she cuts off her hair). I do not pretend here to give a full analysis of the significance of these observations but rather merely wish to point out their oversight in Clover.

More pertinent to my own concerns and to the criticisms I have levelled at Clover's approach, is the fact that in comparing *The Accused* with *I Spit on Your Grave*, Clover fails to take into account changes in the historical and political context in which the film was produced and consumed. For example, the shift from female revenge to legal revenge is perhaps best understood within the context of the right-wing populism of the Reagan era in which liberal institutions were increasingly subject both to critique and rejuvenation. Clover's evaluative analysis of the film's 'feminism' thus overlooks the way in which the film might be read as an attempt to make sense of, or to construct a popular version of, feminism within a specific historical and political context. In chapter 4 I shall attempt such a reading through an analytical survey of reviews of *The Accused*.

If *The Accused* can be seen to mark an historically specific shift from female revenge to legal revenge, the film's 'flashback' representation of the rape also marks another historically specific shift in which, as Clover herself observes, 'by the mid-1980s, rape moved virtually offscreen'.<sup>40</sup> However, not only does Clover fail to

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 140.



interrogate why this might be so, she also fails to notice that this fact, along with the 'very brief and unerotic' rapes of *Ms. 45* and *Lipstick*,<sup>41</sup> radically undermine her later argument that for the male spectator 'the revenge fantasy derives its force from *some* degree of imaginary participation in [the rape] itself, in the victim position', and consequently her claim that 'these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, what Clover fails to recognize in her celebration of the move away from a representation of rape which 'exudes a kind of lascivious sadism with which the viewer is directly invited to collude', is that 'the brief and unerotic' nature of rape-revenge's representation of rape is often more than made up for in the concomitant 'eroticization' of the female-avenger.<sup>43</sup> In addition, with the rape often simply 'not there', questions of motivation move to the forefront, accompanied by questions of whether these vengeful women are justified or unjustified, mad or bad. Finally, the disappearance of rape and the eroticization of the vengeful woman suggest that the rape-revenge film has more in common with the violent women of the erotic thrillers and neo-noirs of recent years than Clover's generically specific argument acknowledges. Before going on to explore this connection, however, I want to expand the discursive framework by looking more closely at other work on the rape-revenge film.

What is perhaps significant about virtually all accounts of the rape-revenge film is that all, at some point, engage critically with Roger Ebert's famous diatribe against *Spit on Your Grave*.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a critique of Ebert's argument is commonly taken as

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<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154, see also p. 152 'the slasher genre is predicated on spectatorial identification with females in fear and pain'.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>44</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Why Movie Audiences Aren't Safe Anymore', *American Film*, 6:5 (March 1981), 54-56.

the starting point for analysis and I would suggest that such an approach can largely be seen as accounting for the assumption of a predominantly male audience and the concomitant emphasis on explaining male spectatorial pleasure in discussions of such films. Peter Lehman's analysis, for example, like Clover's, is predicated on an initial disagreement with Ebert's presumption that 'the pleasure of watching these films for men lies in identification with the rapists and their assault on the woman'.<sup>45</sup> Instead, like Clover, Lehman argues that 'male spectators are positioned to be disgusted by the rape and to identify with the avenging woman'.<sup>46</sup> What I want to suggest, however, is that both Clover's and Lehman's critiques are based on a superficial reading of Ebert's arguments and that these actually have little to do with cinematic point of view.

Ebert's intentions are, on the surface, ostensibly noble; he criticizes what he refers to as 'the woman-in-danger' film (a categorization which covers both rape-revenge and slasher films) on the basis of their 'sick attitude toward women' and their 'antifemale theme' and even concurs with fellow critic, Siskel's claim that

'this has something to do with the growth of the women's movement in America in the last decade. These films are some sort of primordial response by *very sick people* saying, "Get back in your place, women!" The women in these films are typically portrayed as independent, as sexual, as enjoying life. And the killer, typically – not all the time but

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Lehman, "'Don't Blame this on a Girl': Female Rape-revenge Films', in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 103-117 (p. 104).

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 104.

most often – is a man who is sexually frustrated with these new aggressive women, and so he strikes back at them.’<sup>47</sup>

Clearly this ignores what these films, with their rape-avenging women and final girls, are actually about – women’s refusal to get back in their place, their refusal to be killed off, their refusal to live in fear and danger. Indeed, Ebert’s characterization of such films as about ‘women-in-danger’ ignores the way they are equally about men-in-danger. Yet, ironically, reading between the lines reveals that it is in fact the latter rather than the former which concerns Ebert – not in any simple way as the victims of female violence, but as victims of a representational seachange in the depiction of male rapists and murderers. As my emphasis on the ‘very sick people’ in the above quote is intended to highlight, what concerns Ebert in the second half of this article is not cinematic devices or point of view but the representation of male villains as either normal or abnormal. In other words, Ebert admits that he has nothing against horror films *per se*, that he in fact quite enjoys them and is not ‘automatically turned off, let’s say, just because a film is about *a berserk raving homicidal madman*’.<sup>48</sup> To this end he praises John Carpenter’s *Halloween* and claims that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* has redeeming features because the latter features ‘*heinous* villains’ and in the former a psychiatrist testifies to the fact that the killer is ‘the embodiment of *evil*’.<sup>49</sup> In other words, such films are acceptable not because they do not encourage audience identification with the killer through the use of cinematic point of view (the opening sequence of *Halloween* is perhaps the most famous and influential example of

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<sup>47</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore’, *American Film*, 6:5 (March 1981), 54-56 (p. 55, my emphasis).

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56 (my emphasis).

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56 (my emphasis).

such techniques), but because they distinguish the ‘normal’ male audience from the ‘abnormal’ male killer and the male spectator is consequently ‘not implicated’ in the male violence against women depicted on the screen.<sup>50</sup> Films such as *Prom Night* or *Terror Train*, however, come under attack from Ebert because ‘the killer is never clearly seen nor understood once the killings begin’.<sup>51</sup> The implication here, then, is that since the killer is ‘never clearly seen’ he could be any man, and that as he is never ‘understood’, that is, as he is never given an adequate (psychopathic) motive, he could be any *normal* man – as Ebert himself points out the killer becomes ‘a *nonspecific* male killing force’.<sup>52</sup> It is not therefore the use of shots from the ‘killer’s point of view’ to establish audience identification with the killer that differentiates these two sets of films – since both use these techniques – but the fact that, in those Ebert endorses, the male viewer is able to get pleasure from such identification, whilst the abnormality of the killer enables him to disavow his complicity in the violence depicted and to find the destruction of the abnormal Other enjoyable. In those such as *I Spit on Your Grave* which Ebert criticizes, on the other hand, the nonspecificity of the killer and the “normalization” of the rapist’ means that the pleasure of identification is undercut not only by implication but by violent female retribution.<sup>53</sup> That it is not actually ‘the terrible things [that] are happening to women’ in such films which concerns Ebert, but the way in which ‘normal’ men are implicated in (and punished for) male violence against women, is betrayed in his final sentence: ‘Now the “victim” is the poor, put upon, traumatized male in the audience. And the demons are

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56 (my emphasis).

<sup>53</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 144.



the women on the screen.’<sup>54</sup> Clearly, this suggests that it is not so much male spectatorial pleasure that concerns Ebert but rather issues surrounding the representation of, and motivation for, *male* violence.

In predicating his analysis on a disagreement with what is essentially a misconception of Ebert’s argument, Peter Lehman, like Clover, is forced into finding alternative ways to account for the pleasures these films afford male viewers. Following Clover, Lehman devotes a significant part of his article to outlining the key features of the rape-revenge film. However, whilst he agrees with Clover that the rapist(s) is nearly always repulsive, he also fills in a significant gap in Clover’s analysis by pointing out that the women are nearly always beautiful. These two observations come into play in Lehman’s initial suggestion as to why men find these films so appealing. In other words, he argues that both the rapist and the spectator have a similar desire for the erotic woman but that the spectator cannot acknowledge this similarity with the rapist. Consequently, the spectator projects his repressed desires onto the rapist and this is why the rapist is always characterized as so repulsive. In this way, according to Lehman, ‘The male spectator can hate rather than simply identify with these men who embody desires similar to their own.’<sup>55</sup> However, the fact that the female character is frequently not eroticized until *after* the rape and that the rape, in fact, is a process through which she is transformed, I think problematizes this argument for the spectators’ and rapists’ objects of desire being one and the same. Furthermore, despite the fact that this analysis is constructed *against* Ebert’s, it in fact

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<sup>54</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘Why Movie Audiences Aren’t Safe Anymore’, *American Film*, 6:5 (March 1981), 54-56 (p. 56).

<sup>55</sup> Peter Lehman, “‘Don’t Blame this on a Girl’: Female Rape-revenge Films’, in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 103-117 (p. 112).

merely reverses its polarity, defending *I Spit on Your Grave* for the same ideologically suspect reasons Ebert defended *Halloween* and criticized *I Spit*. In other words, defending either film on the basis that men do not identify with the killer/rapist because they are abnormal/repulsive fails to criticize the way in which this facilitates a collective male disavowal of their complicity in violence against women.

Lehman's second argument is that 'the rape-revenge film suggests repressed homosexuality and, in the extreme, homophobia'.<sup>56</sup> He consequently claims that for the heterosexual male spectator the rape-revenge film functions to disguise and punish this homosexuality 'by having a beautiful woman brutally attack the male body in general and the genitals in specific'.<sup>57</sup> Whilst like Lehman's former argument, this theory is psychoanalytically based and therefore virtually impossible to disprove, it also appears to similarly rest on a generalized misreading of the films themselves. In other words, Lehman argues that the rapes in these films 'nearly always involve a group of men' who are friends or gang members and that this suggests 'male homoerotic bonding. The friends "share" the woman in a manner which unites them'.<sup>58</sup> However, not only does this fail to account for the films in which the rape does *not* 'nearly always' involve a group of men, it also fails to recognize the way in which the group structure, as Clover points out, represents rape as a form of competition or sport in which the men are pitted *against* one another in an attempt to prove their *heterosexual* prowess.

The emphasis on male spectatorial pleasure is consequently not only misguided and limiting, but the psychoanalytical theoretical parameters in which such analyses tend

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

to be set provide few openings for critical engagement and debate and are consequently tenuous and unconvincing. Nevertheless, Lehman does identify an important and consistent feature in the films *themselves* which I think not only offers a simpler and more plausible explanation for the pleasures these films afford the male viewer, but which also serves to undermine the generic specificity usually attributed to the rape-revenge film. This is what Lehman calls the films' 'structures of erotic anticipation'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, although men are violently punished in these films, it is more often than not in a context which is 'overtly erotic' and punishment is frequently preceded by the promise of sexual pleasure. That is, the revenging woman leads her victim (and the male spectator) to believe she is about to make love to him but instead hangs, castrates or shoots him. This structure features in what can perhaps be identified as one of the first rape-revenge films of the period, Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972). Whilst this differs from the later films in terms of the fact that it is the woman's *parents* who exact revenge for her rape and murder, and whilst the structure of erotic anticipation is only used in one out of four deaths (the mother first seduces one of the rapists, then fellates him and then bites his penis off), it can be seen as a feature which is both consistent with, and influential on, the later films. By the time of *I Spit On Your Grave* (1977), then, not only were all the deaths marked by this structure but its deployment had also become more complex and sophisticated. Here, the first murder establishes the structure with Jennifer first seducing Matthew and then, as they begin to have intercourse, slipping a noose over his head and hanging him. The second murder, however, initially reverses this structure. In other words, when Jennifer first confronts Johnny, it is the threat of violence rather than the

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106.

promise of sexual pleasure which is anticipated as she forces him to remove his trousers at gun point, clearly intending to shoot him in the genitals. Nevertheless, in response to Johnny's pleas Jennifer appears to yield and they return to her house where they take a bath together. Consequently, with the threat of violence apparently overcome, erotic anticipation would appear to be uncompromised for both Johnny and the male spectator. Yet, the film quickly effects a double reversal, re-establishing the traditional structure as Jennifer castrates her unsuspecting victim.

What I want to argue, moreover, is that the influence of these structures of erotic anticipation extend far beyond the rape-revenge film and that they in fact find expression in the very term used to describe a recent cycle of films. I am thinking, of course, of the 'erotic *thriller*', which similarly features violent women whose attacks on men are frequently preceded by erotic overtures. Consider, for instance, the opening sequence of *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), which has all the markings of pure erotic spectacle but which suddenly and without warning degenerates into frenzied and bloody violence. More explicit an example still is *Body of Evidence* (Uli Edel, 1992) in which sex is itself the murder weapon as an aged millionaire anticipates a night of sexual pleasure with dominatrix Rebecca Carlson (Madonna) only for the exertion and the kinkiness of the sex to give him heart failure. Furthermore, whereas unlike the rape-revenge film, there is no apparent motivation for such attacks, this coupling of sex and violence suggests a similar reversal of, and therefore revenge for, the sexual violence men commit against women. Yet, whilst these structures of erotic anticipation may explain the male viewer's pleasure in such films, I take exception to Lehman's assertion that 'such eroticized deaths are male



fantasies which are unlikely to be of “interest” to women’.<sup>60</sup> Although I do not wish to make similar, unsupported, claims for a female audience for such films, the literature on both the rape-revenge film and the erotic thriller demonstrates that, within the academy at least, these films have proved to be of remarkable interest to women with Clover even situating herself as ‘something of a fan’.<sup>61</sup> My discussion of this literature will therefore attempt to displace the traditional emphasis on male spectatorial pleasure through an exploration of why these films, like film noir, are of such interest to feminist critics. Moreover, within the context of the enduring and increased popularity of these films in the last twenty years, and against the tendency of these analyses to distinguish the rape-revenge film from the erotic thriller, I will also be developing an analysis which argues that both form part of an ongoing historically, rather than generically, specific cycle.

Whilst Barbara Creed’s discussion of the *femme castratrice* embraces both sets of films they are differentiated on the basis of whether the castrating woman is justified or unjustified, motivated or motiveless. In other words, she argues that in film, the *femme castratrice* assumes two forms, ‘the castrating female psychotic (*Sisters*, *Play Misty for Me*, *Repulsion*, *Basic Instinct*) and the woman who seeks revenge on men who have raped or abused her in some way’.<sup>62</sup> According to Creed, then, these two groups of films are unified by the motif of the *femme castratrice* and the genre of horror and where they differ is in their representation of rape. In other words, when the rape is simply ‘not there’, as for example in *Sisters*, the castrating woman is

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>61</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 123.

depicted 'as psychotic, a madwoman who wishes to avenge herself against the whole male sex'.<sup>63</sup> Yet, whilst this formulation of the motif of the *femme castratrice* allows Creed to embrace films beyond those typically regarded as 'rape-revenge' films, both groups of films are still categorized as falling within the genre of horror. However, whereas my argument against Clover's categorization of rape-revenge films as a sub-genre of horror was based on the absence of an adequately defined monster, there is no such equivocation in Creed and my disagreement with her classification of films such as *Basic Instinct* and *Play Misty for Me* as horror is consequently somewhat different. In other words, Creed's genre argument rests precisely on an analysis of the female characters in her chosen films as representative of the *monstrous-feminine*, not only as has traditionally been argued because man fears woman because she is castrated, but in Creed's *reformulation*, because she is also *castrator*. Nevertheless, this formulation means that almost *any* representation of woman as deadly or murderous can be classified as a horror film and, although this is, in fact, exactly what it enables Creed to do, the category ultimately becomes so large and all encompassing as to disintegrate into meaninglessness. Rather, what I think Creed's discussion *does*, inadvertently, point up is an historically rather than generically specific proliferation of murderous women. In other words, out of her corpus of 208 films spanning a ninety year period (1902 to 1992), well over half (124) were made in the twenty two years from 1970 to 1992. Whilst I agree with Creed therefore that there *is* a link between rape-revenge films and films such as *Basic Instinct* and *Play Misty for Me*, I think this link is actually historically rather than generically specific and is consequently better

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<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.

understood in terms of the rise of second-wave feminism and discourses of rape than in relation to ahistorical and universal psychoanalytic concepts.

Against Creed's argument that what these films have in common is the *femme castratrice* and the horror genre, then, I can only reiterate that rape-revenge is best understood not as a sub-genre of horror but as a narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced an historically specific, but generically diverse, cycle of films which is still finding expression today in the erotic thrillers and neo-noirs of the 1990s. Certainly, the frequent eroticization of the rape avenging woman, which Creed herself notes, combined with Clover's observation that 'by the mid-1980s, rape moved virtually offscreen' would seem to support this thesis.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, against Creed's suggestion that what differentiates erotic thrillers such as *Basic Instinct* from rape-revenge films such as *I Spit On Your Grave* is the absence in the former of a motive such as rape, and therefore the representation of characters such as Catherine Trammell (Sharon Stone) as psychotic rather justified in their deadliness, I would suggest that rape may have moved offscreen but it has not disappeared altogether. In fact, it is surprising how often rape does still figure in the erotic thrillers and neo-noirs of the 1990s. For example, given that all the female characters in *Basic Instinct* could be characterized as deadly, one of them, Beth (Jeanne Tripplehorn), is at least given some sort of motive – date rape at the hands of the hero, Nick (Michael Douglas). In *Blue Steel*, something of a generic hybrid, both sexual and domestic violence against women pervades the film. Opening with a 'mock' scene of domestic violence during the heroine, Megan's, police training,

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<sup>64</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 140.



Megan (Jamie Lee Curtis) is later raped by the psychopathic Eugene (Ron Silver) and the domestic violence suffered by her mother is implicitly offered as the motivation for Megan's choice of career in the police force. Indeed, as Harriet E. Margolis points out, the film works on a double structure of investigation.<sup>65</sup> In other words, while Megan investigates male violence against women, the men in the film investigate her motives for becoming a cop (she is asked why no less than three times during the film). Whereas Megan's answer to this question is initially flippant - 'I like to slam people's heads against walls', 'I want to shoot people' - the answer eventually becomes simply 'Him'. Although this is clearly intended to refer to Eugene, the fact that she uses a generalized third person pronoun rather than a specific name, suggests that it is a more generalized and pervasive male violence she wishes to investigate and avenge, desires which materialise in both her arrest of her father and her killing of Eugene. Similarly complex is the Hitchcockian *Final Analysis* (Phil Joanou, 1992) in which incestual rape is first given as the explanation for the 'disturbed' younger sister, Diana's (Uma Thurman), psychosis but actually finally emerges as the reason for the 'normal' older sister, Heather's (Kim Basinger), murder of father and husband. Furthermore, the more 'traditional' rape-revenge structure has recently reappeared in the British erotic thriller, *Dirty Weekend* and in the female road/buddy movie, *Thelma and Louise*. As the example of *Thelma and Louise* illustrates, therefore, the deployment of the rape-revenge structure is not confined to the erotic thriller or neo-noir. Rather the structure has been mapped across a whole range of genres, including the western and the domestic/maternal melodrama. The erotic thriller/neo-noir and the

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<sup>65</sup> Harriet E. Margolis, 'Blue Steel: Progressive Feminism in the '90s?', *Postscript*, 13:1 (1993), 67-76.

domestic/maternal melodrama, however, represent the two key directions the rape-revenge cycle has taken in the 1990s and these will be explored in chapters 6 and 7 respectively. A particularly interesting example of the latter direction, often cited in the academic analyses of the 'violent woman' film discussed below, is *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992).<sup>66</sup> Here the revenge drama is motivated not by the rape of the violent and vengeful female protagonist, Peyton (Rebecca de Mornay), but by the charge of sexual assault brought against Peyton's gynaecologist husband by the good wife and mother of the film, Claire Bartel (Annabella Sciorra). The charge results in the husband's suicide and Peyton's miscarriage and sexual violation can consequently be seen as directly responsible for the violent retribution that ensues. In chapter 7, however, I will focus on the more conventional deployments of the rape-revenge structure found in the maternal rape-revenge melodramas *In My Daughter's Name* and *Eye for an Eye*.

Curiously, despite the huge critical interest in what is seen as a *recent* proliferation of deadly and murderous women in the films of the 1980s and 1990s, few critics have been willing to acknowledge the connection between these representations and the rape-revenge film. Whilst Creed makes this connection, it is one that I have argued is problematized by its reliance on an unconvincing genre argument and a universal and ahistorical notion of the castrating woman. She consequently ignores the specificity of both the historical context and the issues of rape and revenge since these latter defining principles are what is seen as *distinguishing* the one set of films from the other. Yet, despite the fact that work on the violent women in the films of recent

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<sup>66</sup> See also: Deborah Jermyn, 'Rereading the Bitches from Hell: A Feminist Appropriation of the Female Psychopath', *Screen*, 37:3 (Autumn 1996), 251-267.

years shows a greater willingness to recognize the historical specificity of such representations and to acknowledge the generic hybridity of Hollywood film in the post-modern age, such distinctions continue to be either implicitly or explicitly made and the desire to locate (and contain) cinema's violent women within a traditional generic home still informs some work.

The latter tendency is particularly apparent in Julianne Pidduck's article on what she terms the 'fatal femme'.<sup>67</sup> Whilst she refers throughout to films featuring such women as part of the 'fatal femme cycle' this *cycle* is seen as belonging to the larger and more specific *genre* of the thriller or neo-noir. Furthermore, as this rearticulation of terms suggest, for Pidduck, such killer women are seen as the offspring of the femme fatale of film noir. Where Creed's location of the monstrous-feminine within the horror genre relied on but re-conceptualized psychoanalytical approaches to the genre, then, Pidduck's situation of the fatal femme within neo-noir depends on but re-articulates feminist readings of the femme fatale of film noir. Pidduck consequently argues that

if the *femme fatale* in wartime and post-war cinema is often connected to a deep-seated unease in the shifting gender roles in that society, the fatal femme [...] marks the ongoing troubled status of issues of gender, violence, and power within North American society.<sup>68</sup>

Like Doane, then, who suggested that the femme fatale was 'a symptom of male fears about feminism', Pidduck argues that the 1990s fatal femme can be seen as a

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<sup>67</sup> Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 65-72.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65.



manifestation of the backlash against feminism in the 1980s as documented by Susan Faludi.<sup>69</sup> To this end, Pidduck identifies a number of similarities between the film noirs of the 40s and 50s and the neo-noirs of the 1990s. Both are marked by the absence of family (although in the later films if the family is present it is a family under threat), in both males are put at risk by the femme fatale/fatal femme and his authority undermined, and finally both often ‘contain’ or punish the aberrant woman for the attack she has made on patriarchal society through strategies such as insanity and death. However, implicitly following Doane’s argument that the representation of the femme fatale is ‘not totally under the control of its producers and, once disseminated comes to take on a life of its own’, Pidduck points out that the fatal femme often eludes complete containment and that there is frequently a certain ambivalence towards her defeat.<sup>70</sup> Such ambivalence, she argues, can be read as supporting the fatal femme’s attack on the family (often already dysfunctional) and male authority (often already undermined). Inasmuch, she claims that ‘the generic proliferation of the fatal femme can never perform a *merely* repressive, “containing” gesture’ and that, despite the films’ misogynistic aspects, their irony, self-referentiality, ambiguity and inter-textuality open up alternate readings which ‘identify moments of struggle (for example, over representation and closure) and even moments of rupture which allow for pleasurable feminist readings’.<sup>71</sup>

Pidduck’s reference here to ‘generic proliferation’ suggests that although her argument is fairly firmly situated within, and dependent on, existing work around film

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<sup>69</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> Julianne Pidduck, ‘The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence’, *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 65-72 (p. 71 and p. 70 respectively).

noir, she has a more flexible approach to genre than either Creed or Clover.

Consequently, despite her initial claim that the fatal femme cycle is ‘an extensive 1990s cycle of *thrillers* featuring women who kill’, she later concedes that the cycle blends the genres of ‘suspense, melodrama/romance, and horror’.<sup>72</sup> Pidduck’s emphasis on the generic hybridity and historical specificity of the fatal femme cycle thus clearly point to a number of similarities with my own approach to the rape-revenge cycle. I find it remarkable, therefore, given these similarities in emphasis and the fact that Pidduck’s final section is entitled ‘Violence against Women and the “Violent Femme”’, that virtually no mention is made of the rape-revenge film or its possible influence on the fatal femme cycle. The tendency of Pidduck and others to look straight to film noir for these films’ most famous and well-defined antecedents is perhaps partly to blame for this oversight.<sup>73</sup> However, this tendency is perhaps itself symptomatic of what is at stake in feminist appropriations of the violent woman film.

In other words, I would tentatively suggest that feminists, myself included, are drawn to film noirs, erotic thrillers and neo-noirs because they represent a fantasy of being conventionally feminine but strong. Rape-revenge, on the other hand, thanks largely to widespread success and circulation of Clover’s work, would seem to offer the rather less appealing prospect of a masculinized female victim-hero constructed for the pleasure of the male spectator. In summary, the pleasures the femme fatale/fatale femme (and in my case, the female avenger) offer feminist critics would appear to lie

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65 (my emphasis) and p. 67 respectively.

<sup>73</sup> See for example:

Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Robert E. Wood, ‘Somebody Has To Die: *Basic Instinct* as White Noir’, *Postscript*, 12:3 (1993), 44-51.

in the way in which they imaginarily resolve the opposition between feminine and feminist identities on which feminism has for so long depended.

Pidduck's characterization of the rape-revenge film also points towards another of the reasons why feminists interested in the violent woman film have tended to circumvent the rape-revenge film. In other words, Pidduck's references to rape-revenge films emphasize their depiction of violence *against* women rather than of violent women. Thus she argues that although

aspects of violence *against* women have been explored through a *handful* of films like *Loyalties*, *Living with Billy*, *The Accused*, *The Burning Bed*, *Extremities*, or *Thelma and Louise* [...] with the exception of the latter, these dramas have largely been eclipsed in profits and notoriety by the likes of *Fatal Attraction* or *Basic Instinct*.<sup>74</sup>

However, this clearly ignores the fact that several of the former films not only explore violence *against* women but violent women (*The Accused*, *The Burning Bed*, *Extremities*, *Thelma and Louise*) and that such rape-revenge films far exceed a mere 'handful' and are in fact part of a lengthy and ongoing cycle (itself a testament to the 'profitability' of the rape-revenge formula).

Thus, while I am not denying the obvious influence of film noir and the femme fatale on the fatal femme films of recent years, I want to suggest that these films owe an equal debt to the rape-revenge film and the female avenger and that this is evidenced by a number of similarities and continuities between the two sets of films.

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<sup>74</sup> Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 65-72 (p. 71, my emphasis).



For example, although Pidduck initially argues that both femme fatales and fatal femmes come out of a similar historical context of backlash against feminism, she ultimately ends up arguing against this thesis in relation to fatal femmes. The rape-revenge and fatal femme cycles, which both emerged during the period of *second-wave* feminism, can perhaps therefore be seen as sharing more in terms of historical context. In particular, whilst both cycles can be partially understood in terms of backlash politics, it can also be argued that it is precisely second-wave feminism that has *enabled* such representations. Clover articulates this ambiguity when she states that ‘the figure of the self-saving Final Girl and the self-avenging rape victim may, *for better or worse*, be the main contribution to popular culture of the women’s movement and the “new family”’.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, whilst according to Pidduck, ‘the fatal femme ups the ante of earlier, more muted cinematic codes of sexuality and graphic violence’, the fatal femme cycle and the rape-revenge film are roughly equivalent in this respect, particularly since, as I have been suggesting, the rape-revenge film was perhaps the first to present overt displays of female violence as specifically eroticized. In addition, Pidduck although noting that the containment of the fatal femme, unlike that of the femme fatale, is often ambivalent or bypassed altogether, fails to recognize that the fatal femme therefore has more in common with the vengeful rape victim who is also rarely shown to be punished for her violent attacks on men. Finally, as I have pointed out, rape does feature, albeit more subtly, as a motive in the fatal femme cycle. Linda Williams picks up on some of these similarities when she argues that

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<sup>75</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 162 (my emphasis).

erotic thrillers may almost have done away with the *femme fatale*, but this doesn't stop their women from being unsettlingly exciting. However audacious they are, they don't get punished for it, and having enjoyed the sex they can then switch roles as the films slip genres and the women take their revenge.<sup>76</sup>

*Sexual Intent* (Kurt MacCarley, 1992), for example, 'turns from erotic thriller to rape-revenge narrative, when three of the women overcome their sexual rivalry to round up the villain and shoot him, only so a fourth can run him over'.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, although Williams notes the continuity between the two sets of films her analysis is mainly predicated on distinguishing and contrasting straight to video erotic thrillers such as *Sexual Intent* and high budget blockbusters such as *Basic Instinct*, arguing, like Clover, that the lower forms of the genre are more progressive in terms of feminism than the higher versions. Against this tendency to make various distinctions between the fatal femme and the female avenger, neo-noir and rape-revenge, I want to argue that the fatal femme, or what I would call the erotic female avenger, is a product of the negotiations that occur when the rape-revenge structure is mapped over the genre of film noir. In other words, the erotic female avenger/fatale femme is a product of the negotiations between the noir story and the rape-revenge story, the femme fatale and the female avenger, the backlash politics of noir and contemporary feminism. In as much, the politics of the erotic thriller/neo-noir are best understood not as relatively progressive or reactionary but as an attempt to make sense of feminism, not as

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<sup>76</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, 'Sisters Under the Skin: Video and Blockbuster Erotic Thrillers', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 105-114 (p. 112).

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

reflecting or deflecting 'authentic' feminist politics but as constructing popular versions of feminism.

Pidduck, like Creed, however, distinguishes the *justified* revenge fantasy of, for example, *Thelma and Louise*, and the *justified* violence used by the women in *Terminator II* and *Blue Steel* from the violence of the fatal femme who, she claims, 'rarely lines up in any straightforward way with the forces of righteousness, feminist or otherwise'.<sup>78</sup> Yet, whilst Pidduck goes on to acknowledge that many of these films do deal with sexual harassment or rape (*Disclosure*, *The Last Seduction*, *Basic Instinct*, *Single White Female*) this is not offered as a valid motive or justification for female violence since the examples she cites appear to refer to incidents when the woman is in the role of perpetrator and man in the role of victim. Nevertheless, in claiming that the thriller 'specializes in *turning the tables* on what is perhaps *the* quintessential (and most high profile) male crime against women: sexual assault coupled with violent attack', Pidduck inadvertently points out that that rape-revenge is precisely what the fatal femme cycle is often all about.<sup>79</sup> The motivating rape is no longer there partly because since it has now become '*the* quintessential (and most high profile) male crime against women' it no longer needs to be depicted and is frequently only alluded to. Indeed, that violence against women is no longer the unspeakable and well-kept secret it once was but a marketing device, rating alongside the 'rape' of the environment on the consumer agenda, is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the campaign against domestic violence run by the international retail chain with a social conscience, The Body Shop, in 1996. A more detailed analysis of the processes

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<sup>78</sup> Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)Figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 65-72 (p. 72).

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72 (my emphasis).



through which feminist discourses have been circulated and popularized in contemporary Hollywood film will form a key focus of subsequent chapters.

Following on from my earlier critical engagement with the work of both Ebert and Lehman, the absence of rape can also be interpreted as having certain benefits for both male *and* female spectators. In other words, on one hand, the male spectator is allowed the pleasure of the erotic spectacle of female violence without such clearly signaled implication or guilt, whilst still being afforded the promise of sexual gratification through structures of erotic anticipation. Furthermore, that it is not always clear what motivates the violent woman or when, who, or indeed if, she will strike next results in a certain ambiguity and playfulness in the films' deployment of these structures. This is particularly apparent in *Basic Instinct* where Nick (and the male spectator), able to believe that he is somehow outside the scope of Catherine's violent impulses, twice anticipates an erotically charged future in which 'We'll fuck like minks, raise rugrats, and live happily ever after'. Whilst such a future is perhaps somewhat undermined in the final sequence by the ice-pick under the bed, the film still ends having played out only the initial and most pleasurable aspect of the erotic structure. On the other hand, as Pidduck argues, the fatal femme cycle's 'consistent turning of the tables allows (female) spectators to explore a shift at the level of fantasy and representation, as Lenz suggests, "from being the object of violence (victimization) to being its subject (aggression)".<sup>80</sup> However, this shift and the 'venting of rage and revenge fantasies' it facilitates is, I would suggest, not specific or

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<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

new to the fatal femme cycle but has its roots quite firmly in the rape-revenge structure.<sup>81</sup>

Like Pidduck, Christine Holmlund is similarly interested in the recent proliferation of what she terms 'deadly dolls'.<sup>82</sup> Whilst she concedes that women who kill have always featured in Hollywood films, she claims that in the period 1981 to 1991 such representations have significantly increased. Like Pidduck also, Holmlund likens these deadly dolls to the femme fatale of film noir, similarly claiming that the explicitness of the former's violence is what differentiates them from the latter. However, she is much quicker than Pidduck to distinguish the rape-revenge film of the 1970s from the deadly doll films of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, whilst like Creed and Pidduck her justification for the distinction centres around the issue of motive, her argument in this respect is somewhat different. In other words, whereas Pidduck and Creed distinguished the vengeful women of rape-revenge from the fatal or monstrous women of other films on the basis of the former's justification and the latter's lack of apparent motivation or pathology, Holmlund argues that while the former offered a single motivation (self-defence/revenge) the deadly doll films actually 'expand the list of possible motivations' in order to diffuse the threat they present.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Holmlund's arguments concerning genre further complicate and confuse issues since she claims that while the 'innocent' killers of the rape-revenge films of the 1970s 'were confined to a single genre: the thriller', the deadly doll films of the 1980s 'widen the range of possible genres'.<sup>84</sup> Although this goes slightly further than

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>82</sup> Christine Holmlund, 'A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer', in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, ed. by Helen Birch (London: Virago, 1993), pp. 127-151.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

Pidduck's argument towards exploding the generic specificity of Creed and Clover's theories about violent women, the women of rape-revenge still remain isolated from other representations of violent women both in terms of genre and motivation.

However, from my perspective, the fact that such critical arguments around genre and motivation rarely agree only seems to confirm that the dividing line between the vengeful women of rape-revenge and the monstrous/fatal/deadly women of recent years may be more blurred than these critics are willing to acknowledge.

Whilst the range of films Holmlund cites does allow her to argue with some conviction for these films offering multiple motivations and a mix of generic elements, her claim that 'regardless of genre, several films still promote female violence as self-defence or revenge for rape and/or abuse' would seem to undermine any attempt to distinguish vengeful women from deadly dolls by confining the former to the 1970s, the motive of rape and the thriller genre. Indeed, of the six deadly doll films Holmlund analyses (*Black Widow*, *Aliens*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Blue Steel*, *Mortal Thoughts* and *Thelma and Louise*) half feature rape and violence against women as a motivation (*Blue Steel*, *Mortal Thoughts* and *Thelma and Louise*). Moreover, that many of Holmlund's observations about the proliferation of deadly dolls in the 1980s are equally applicable to, or suggest the influence of, the rape-revenge film would appear to further confirm that the latter runs not separately but concurrently with the former and that they both form part of an ongoing cycle. For example, like the rape-revenge film, the deadly doll film eroticizes female violence and 'the murderesses in these films are, to a woman, white, lithe and lovely'.<sup>85</sup> To this end Holmlund contends that of the six films she analyses all

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<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128.



are really more obsessed with the changing shape and status of heterosexual femininity than with homicide. Most translate this obsession visually, paying hyper-attention to costume and make-up and offering lingering and/or shock close-ups of soft and hard bodies.<sup>86</sup>

I will be arguing that the rape-revenge cycle is similarly preoccupied with articulating and making sense of the transformations that have occurred in and around heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period. In so doing, I will argue that the rape-revenge structure is best understood as articulating a movement not from the feminine (rape) to the masculine (revenge) – since, as I have pointed out, the process of eroticization complicates such an analysis – but from private to public femininities. Clearly, the private/public binary has, like the rape/revenge binary, traditionally been understood as gendered feminine and masculine respectively. However, as Hilary Radner has observed, in the twentieth century this gendered distinction came increasingly under historical pressure. In other words, she argues that:

As women came to work outside the home, and acquired economic independence from the family (as they came to make their own decisions rather than following the wishes of the father, head of that family) new categories and structures of femininity and its attendant virtues emerged and new stories [...] came to be told in which the heterosexual contract was of necessity figured differently.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>87</sup> Hilary Radner, 'Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 56-76 (p. 57).

These 'new categories and structures of femininity', of which the working girl is the archetype, Radner terms 'public' femininities. As Radner's use of the term 'working girl' (rather than the more neutral 'career woman') suggests, these femininities were explicitly sexualized and were thus distinct from the desexualized private femininity of the mother. According to Radner, the work of Helen Gurley Brown has played a key role in the construction and development of these femininities. In particular, her work 'emphasized reproducing femininity through consumer practices' such as the buying and wearing of clothes.<sup>88</sup> As I hope to show, in the female rape-revenge film femininity is similarly transformed and reproduced through changes in clothing and appearance. In particular, the female avenger, like the working girl, frequently becomes a specifically eroticized figure whose sexuality represents her 'capital' (for the female avenger read 'weapon') within the public domain. In this way, then, the female avenger can be seen as representing one articulation of the new 'public' femininities Radner describes. Eroticization thus not only problematizes the gendered binary implicit in the movement from rape to revenge, it destabilizes the distinction between the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere.

Consequently, whilst Lehman argues that rape in these films is merely 'a narrative pretext' for setting the pleasurable punishment of the male in motion for the male audience, I would suggest that this pleasurable punishment cannot be set in motion without the concomitant transformation of the female, that rape in fact functions primarily as the facilitator and revenge as the articulator of this transformation and that this also has profoundly pleasurable consequences for both *female* spectators and

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

*feminist* critics alike.<sup>89</sup> Thus, against Lehman's claim, set as it is specifically within the context of male pleasure, that these films 'do not even masquerade as seriously concerned with women and rape', I would argue that the rape-revenge film can be seen as both enabled by, and a response to, the feminist discourses which emerged at virtually the same historical moment (the 1970s).<sup>90</sup> More specifically, I will argue that the transformations that occur in the representation of gender when the rape-revenge structure is mapped over existing genres can be read as an attempt to make sense of, and to produce popular understandings of, these discourses. As I have suggested, insofar as feminism can be defined as involving a struggle over the meanings of femininity, it is in its ongoing articulation of these struggles that the rape-revenge film can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism.

Whilst Clover makes some attempt to analyse the rape-revenge film in relation to modern, and particularly feminist debates about sexual violence, her claim that these films 'repeatedly and explicitly articulate feminist politics' tends to be too generalized and simplistic.<sup>91</sup> In particular, 'feminist politics' are taken as a homogenous and static thing rather than as an ongoing and changing debate, while the relationship between feminism and film, text and context, culture and social change, is under-theorized. Furthermore, such historical contextualization is never adequately married with Clover's psychoanalytically based arguments around gender identity and identification. Yet, the fact that an emphasis on challenging established concepts of femininity and gender identity has informed second-wave feminist politics and theory

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Lehman, "'Don't Blame this on a Girl': Female Rape-revenge Films', in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 103-117 (p. 107).

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>91</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 151.



from its inception in the early 1970s suggests that the proliferation of violent women in film during this period cannot be seen simply in terms of ahistorical psychoanalytical concepts (Creed) or 1980s based backlash politics (Siskel/Ebert). Instead, I would argue that the ambivalence towards these representations, articulated by both Clover and Pidduck and echoed in Holmlund's claim that 'although they are in part a response to feminist gains, these deadly dolls are not necessarily a cause for feminist jubilation', is symptomatic of the negotiated, popular versions of feminism they articulate.<sup>92</sup>

Although the absences and gaps in such analyses are clearly significant, what is present is also important and revealing. Concomitant with the perceived proliferation of violent women in film there has been an equal proliferation of, largely feminist, work on the subject. As I have attempted to illustrate, such work tends to divide itself into analyses of the rape-revenge film and analyses of the fatal/deadly woman film. Although both are concerned with the feminist credentials of these films, the latter tend to be more interested in exploring and accounting for the male spectator's stake in such representations, whilst critical debates around deadly doll films, as Holmlund points out, tend to centre on 'perceived changes in femininity'.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, as I have been arguing, this emphasis on the transformation of feminine identity is a feature of both sets of films and not only suggests a way in which we can argue for their similarities and approach their feminist politics, but also perhaps offers a way in which we can redress the emphasis on the male spectator and begin to account for

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<sup>92</sup> Christine Holmlund, 'A Decade of Deadly Dolls: Hollywood and the Woman Killer', in *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation*, ed. by Helen Birch (London: Virago, 1993), pp. 127-151 (p. 128).

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 145.

feminist/female interest and pleasure in such films. Academic analyses of *Thelma and Louise* are perhaps worth exploring here since the film is cited in accounts of both the rape-revenge film and the violent woman film and, out of the six analyses I surveyed, all cite the transformation of the heroines as a transgressively pleasurable aspect of the text. Cathy Griggers, for example, argues that this transformation results in Thelma and Louise becoming hybrids 'not restricted to strict codes of femininity or masculinity'.<sup>94</sup> More explicit still and, furthermore, significant for the way in which it identifies the reconstruction of femininity as a current trend in cinema, is Sharon Willis' assertion that

one of the more compelling pleasures of this film, for me, is the radical change in women's body language – posture, gait, and gesture –, a change that went along with the shift from dressy clothes to tee-shirts and jeans. [...] the prominence of this bodily transformation sets the film in an associative chain of recent images of women clearly 'reconstructed' on screen, like Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in *Aliens* (1987), and most recently and spectacularly, Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2*. These revised embodiments of femininity stress the body's constructed character as costume, a costume that asks us to read it both as machine and as masculinity.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Cathy Griggers, 'Thelma and Louise and the Cultural Generation of the New Butch-Femme', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 129-141 (p. 139).

<sup>95</sup> Sharon Willis, 'Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 120-128 (p. 127).

See also:

Yet, whilst these analyses account for female pleasure through their celebration of the move away from traditional stereotypes of femininity, they fail to explain the pleasures to be found in the transformation of female characters into violent but hyper-feminine and eroticized woman. However, against the tendency to assume that such representations are spectacles designed purely for male enjoyment, it is worth noting, as Jane Gaines has, that although early second-wave feminists saw glamorous and erotic women as antithetical to feminism, more recently it has become possible for feminists 'to declare an interest in and even to confess a serious passion for clothes'.<sup>96</sup> As Linda Williams maintains, 'sexiness is not an index of sexism'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, in line with my suggestion that eroticization might function to destabilize the distinction between the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere, Gaines, following Carol Ascher, has argued that we need to be aware that 'self-decoration' may give 'women a sense of potency to act in the world'.<sup>98</sup> Such representations and the current surge of (feminist) interest in them can perhaps therefore only be fully understood in terms of the fact that, as Janey Place argues in relation to film noir, they are amongst the few in which 'women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their

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Manohla Dargis, 'Thelma and Louise and the Tradition of the Male Road Movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 86-92.

Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Kathleen Murphy, 'Only Angels Have Wings', *Film Comment*, 27:4 (1991), 26-29.

Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 132-141.

<sup>96</sup> Jane Gaines, 'Introduction: Fabricating the Female Body', in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-27 (p. 6).

<sup>97</sup> Linda Ruth Williams, 'Sisters Under the Skin: Video and Blockbuster Erotic Thrillers', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 105-114 (p. 107).

<sup>98</sup> Jane Gaines, 'Introduction: Fabricating the Female Body', in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1-27 (p. 6).



sexuality'.<sup>99</sup> What this suggests is that the distinction between feminism and femininity on which second-wave feminism depended is currently undergoing a process of negotiation and transformation. The rape-revenge cycle and the 'narratives of transformation' it articulates represents, I would suggest, one of the privileged sites through which we can analyse this process and assess its political and theoretical implications for contemporary feminism.

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<sup>99</sup> Jancy Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67 (p. 35).

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM ROMANCE TO REVENGE: *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY*

While *Sleeping with the Enemy* substitutes domestic violence and marital rape for the more sensational 'stranger rape' of other films in the cycle, its narrative can, nevertheless, be seen to represent a clear rendition of the rape-revenge structure. Indeed, its title's almost verbatim use of radical feminist injunctions against heterosexuality would appear to explicitly invite readings in terms of the film's engagement with feminism. In her discussion of Julia Roberts' previous film, *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990), and *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1987), Charlotte Brunson produces such a reading, arguing that: 'However problematic, some form of feminist discourse is occurring within these women's films for the 1990s.'<sup>1</sup> A similar point could be made about *Sleeping with the Enemy* and, in fact, a number of similarities between *Pretty Woman* and *Enemy* imply an attempt to capitalize on the success of the former film and indicate that *Enemy*'s deployment of the rape-revenge structure can perhaps only be fully understood within the context of the discourses both implicit in and surrounding *Pretty Woman*. That these discourses are largely those of femininity and heterosexual romance suggests, moreover, that *Enemy*'s specific articulation of the rape-revenge structure might represent a particularly privileged example of the negotiations that occur between feminism and femininity within the rape-revenge cycle as a whole.

The most obvious similarity between the two films is, of course, *Sleeping with the Enemy*'s 'trying-on-hats' sequence, which is clearly based on *Pretty Woman*'s famous

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brunson, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 101.

and exceptionally popular 'shopping sequence'. Whilst both sequences suggest an engagement with the construction of feminine identity, the use of pieces of nineteenth-century romantic classical music signal an equivalent concern with heterosexual romance. However, although there are clear confluences between the narratives of these pieces of music and those of the films in which they appear, both films ultimately offer *revised* versions of these classical narratives. For example, unlike Violetta in *La Traviata* who 'sends her lover away so that his sister may marry, knowing that as a fallen woman she herself will never become a bride', Vivian (Julia Roberts) in *Pretty Woman* is saved from a life of prostitution precisely *through* marriage.<sup>2</sup> *Sleeping with the Enemy*, on the other hand, features Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* which tells the story of 'the artist's obsession with the woman he adores' and culminates in 'an opium dream in which he dreams he has murdered his beloved'.<sup>3</sup> Whilst *Enemy* similarly features an obsessive and violent man, it concludes with *his* murder at the hands of his 'beloved' rather than vice-versa.

By far the most thoroughgoing similarity between the two films is, however, their reliance on a frame of reference located within the world of fairy-tales.<sup>4</sup> Several critics have commented on the similarities between the narrative of *Pretty Woman* and the Cinderella story and the connection is perhaps so explicit that there is no need to rehearse such arguments here. Despite being rather more subtle and complex, *Sleeping with the Enemy's* fairy-tale references can be seen to support my argument

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary Radner, 'Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 56-76 (p. 65).

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 20 vols (London: Macmillan, 1980), II, p. 594.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Roberts' association with fairy-tales culminated in her being cast in the role of Tinkerbell in *Hook* (Steven Spielberg, 1991).



for reading the film as a kind of sequel to *Pretty Woman*. Moreover, they represent a continuation of the process of narrative and generic revision identified above in both films' deployment of classical music. In other words, if *Pretty Woman* represents a (popular feminist) re-writing of the Cinderella story for the 1990s, then *Sleeping with the Enemy* continues this act of revision by picking up where *Pretty Woman*/Cinderella concluded (with the union of Cinderella/Vivian and Prince Charming/Edward). In *Sleeping with the Enemy*, we are reminded both of this conclusion and of one of the Cinderella narrative's central tropes (the ball) through early references to Martin and Laura's honeymoon and 'the night [he] taught [her] to dance', whilst Laura's role as 'Mrs. Prince Charming' is assured by Martin's continual reference to her as 'princess'. In this sequel to the Cinderella tale, however, Prince Charming turns out to be no better than the Ugly Sisters and he is, in fact, shown to be even more tyrannical and exacting. Far from being rescued from a life of drudgery in the domestic realm, Laura/Cinderella (Julia Roberts) remains firmly located within this realm: she digs for clams, cooks and tidies. Furthermore, if the Ugly Sisters set Cinderella impossible and pointless tasks such as picking dishes of lentils from the ashes, so too does Martin/Prince Charming (Patrick Bergin): the towels in the bathroom must be perfectly straightened and the canned goods lined up on the shelves with military precision. By thus substituting Martin/Prince Charming for the Ugly Sisters, *Sleeping with the Enemy* replaces the Cinderella story's attack on the notion of 'sisterhood' with an attack on patriarchal oppression and thereby exposes the reality behind the fairy-tale.

The early part of the film also contains a 'feminist' re-writing of the Rapunzel tale (in which a witch imprisons a young woman with preternaturally long hair in a tower where she is visited by a prince who reaches her by climbing her hair). The film

references the tale not only by giving Julia Roberts longer hair than we know her naturally to have, but also by verbally evoking the image of the woman imprisoned in the tower in the doctor's comment to Martin: 'So that must be your wife I keep seeing staring down from the window.' The film partially re-writes the story as one of domestic violence in which the role of the malevolent woman is again taken by Martin who believes that Laura, like Rapunzel, has allowed the doctor/prince into her 'tower'. 'When was he in here?' he asks before striking her so hard that she flies across the room. Of course, in Rapunzel, the witch's punishment takes the form of cutting off Rapunzel's hair, thereby denying the prince access to her. In a further twist on the tale, therefore, Laura cuts off her *own* hair as part of her plan to *escape* from Martin. In other words, if in Rapunzel, Rapunzel's hair was, quite literally, the *route* to heterosexual romance, to cut off one's hair, as Laura does in *Sleeping with the Enemy*, implies a *rejection* of heterosexual romance. In this way, then, the film clearly follows the first two stages of the rape-revenge structure: rape (or, in this case, domestic violence) followed by physical transformation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as I hope to have shown, the deployment of this structure involves a concomitant transformation of the generic discourses over which it is mapped.

Thus Laura frees herself from myths of femininity and heterosexual romance by transforming the agents of those myths (long hair and fairy-tales). Moreover, by changing the fairy-tale's narrative, Laura takes control of her own story. This is clearly illustrated in the final fairy-tale reference in this section of the film. Escaping from Cape Cod on a bus, Laura, disguised in a black wig, is offered an apple by an

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the motif of hair cutting can be found in two other articulations of the rape-revenge structure: *Handgun* (Tony Garnett, 1982) and *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988).

older woman.<sup>6</sup> The reference to Snow White, particularly Disney's version in which Snow White has black hair, is obvious. However, in line with the film's eradication of evil women from its 'fairy-tales' here the older woman is benevolent rather than malevolent and encourages Laura to tell her about herself. Laura obliges but constructs her story as a fairy-tale, telling it in the third person and using the kind of terms and phrases usually found in such narratives: 'he was a horrible man', 'at first he was charming', 'she escaped, started a new life'. This story thus represents the third and final instalment of the film's re-telling of the fairy-tale as a narrative of domestic violence.

The prominence of elemental imagery, particularly fire and water, in *Sleeping with the Enemy* not only adds credence to my arguments about the influence and importance of fairy-tales in the film, but works to highlight the film's theme of gender antagonism. As Ruth B. Bottigheimer observes in her study of *Grimms' Tales*: 'In this dualistic world [...] water (or at least certain kinds of water), appertains exclusively to women. Wells, springs, brooks, and streams seem peculiarly under feminine sway' while its opposite, fire, 'belongs peculiarly to male figures and is closely associated with gender antagonism'.<sup>7</sup> Opening with a shot of Laura gathering clams at the sea's edge, water imagery permeates *Sleeping with the Enemy*. Indeed, the film's most widely circulated publicity still featured a shot from the end of the film of Roberts in the bath. With one exception, then, this imagery is always associated with Laura. The introduction of the character of Ben (Kevin Anderson) proves to be the exception, since we first see him *watering* the garden. The symbolism of the scene (the hose pipe,

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<sup>6</sup> The wig can be seen as a further reference to *Pretty Woman*, at the beginning of which Roberts is shown wearing a similar blonde wig.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 29 and p. 25 respectively.



the spurting water), however, suggests that we read it as symbolic of ‘ejaculative’ male sexuality rather than of femininity, particularly given that it introduces the film’s romantic/sexual interest and that Ben is singing a song celebrating masculine identity (‘The Jet Song’ from *West Side Story*). At the very least, the association functions not so much to code Ben as ‘feminine’ as to suggest that he is not typically ‘masculine’ or, in other words, like Martin (for whom, as we will see, water brings nothing but misfortune). Indeed, while in a later scene Ben is also associated with the more masculine fire, it is shown to be an element not totally under his control (he inadvertently sets fire to the pot roast he has cooked for Laura). Elsewhere, then, elemental imagery functions to reaffirm gender duality. For example, when Laura goes to visit her mother in the nursing home disguised as a young man she is shown drinking from a water fountain. Immediately afterwards Martin is shown attempting to drink from the same fountain, which promptly spurts a jet of water into his eye. By showing the water fountain performing in gender specific ways, this incident serves to alleviate any potential anxiety or confusion about gender identity brought about through Laura’s use of sexual disguise. In other words, the fountain (the modern equivalent of a ‘spring’) is shown to be ‘peculiarly under feminine sway’ whilst being ‘dangerous for boys’.<sup>8</sup> This gender duality is further reinforced by the elementally derived names of the characters: Martin’s surname is *Burney* (and at key moments his face is suffused with a burning red light) whilst Laura chooses to change her name to *Sara Waters*. At the end of the film, then, the final, fatal confrontation between Laura and Martin is signalled initially through their totemic elements which, like Martin and Laura’s relationship, are shown to be dangerously out of control. Thus, as Laura’s

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 33.

bath water overflows, the toast burns in the toaster (which almost electrocutes Laura when she unplugs it).

This discussion has, of course, so far failed to address the film's most obvious and important piece of water imagery: Laura's 'death' by drowning and her 'rebirth' as Sara Waters. Laura narrates the flashback to this accident:

That was the night I died and someone else was saved. Someone who was afraid of water but learnt to swim. Someone who knew that there'd be one moment when he wouldn't be watching. Someone who knew that the darkness from the broken lights would show the way.

The broken lights referred to here are clearly a motif borrowed from the world of fairy-tales where, as they venture into unknown realms, the hero or heroine leave a trail of stones or grain in order to mark the way back to safety. What is most striking about this narration, however, is the disjunction it sets up between identities, between old and new selves, crucially suggesting that what is at stake here is a process of transformation. Again, the influence of fairy-tales is apparent, as Bottigheimer points out in her analysis of the archetypal Grimms' tale 'The Three Little Men in the Wood':

Rinsing yarn through a hole in the ice on the river results, however, not in [the good girl's] death, but in her meeting and marrying the king. Water thus functions as a locus of reversal and transformation: the poor harried stepdaughter becomes queen of the realm.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

Despite being similarly mediated through water, *Sleeping with the Enemy*'s transformations would nevertheless appear to depart from the archetypal fairy-tale transformations apparent both here and in *Pretty Woman*. In other words, while the latter examples rely largely on a rags to riches 'Cinderella transformation', *Enemy* seems to offer a feminist inspired 'transformation of consciousness'. Whether or not the film follows through on the logic of this transformation, however, remains to be seen.

In reference to *Pretty Woman*, Charlotte Brunsdon has observed that: 'The explicitness of the reference to Cinderella in this very successful romance has tempted some critics to see this film as a reversion to a pre-feminist narrative.'<sup>10</sup> She goes on to argue, however, that 'just as the reference to Cinderella is contemporary and self-conscious, so is the invocation of the romance genre and the construction of the heroine'.<sup>11</sup> Thus far, *Sleeping with the Enemy* would seem to concur with Brunsdon's arguments. I have already shown in some detail how the film's deployment of the initial stages of the rape-revenge structure updates various fairy-tales by retelling them in terms of contemporary feminist discourses about domestic violence. Moreover, the world into which these discourses are inserted is clearly constructed as contemporary. The house in which Martin and Laura live is exceptionally modern and minimalist and the food they eat – lamb with rosemary and peach chutney, new potatoes, baby peas and herb bread – is contemporary in its sophistication and continentalism. In addition, with the exception of Berlioz, the only pieces of music used within the diegesis during

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<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.



this section of the film are contemporary pop songs: Maxi Priest's 'Close to You' (1990) and Oleta Adams' 'Circle of One' (1991).

In contrast, the world into which Laura escapes is the magical and idyllic world of childhood innocence and fairy-tales. The small midwest town into which she arrives is sunny, leafy and clean. Children paddle in the fountain (girls, naturally) and skip in the square. 'Old-fashioned' values of community and nationalism are reinforced as an old man helps a US marshall raise the American flag which, reflected in the window of the coach, flickers across Laura's smiling face. Here, Laura rents a neglected old-fashioned, wooden fronted house with veranda and swing which she transforms, with loving care, to its former glory. In many respects, this is the film's key transformation sequence, functioning as a metaphor for Laura's transformation. As Laura pulls off the dust sheets, the house's old-fashioned natural charm and beauty is revealed and the pretension and sophistication of Cape Cod rejected. Simultaneously Laura makes the transition from modern, sophisticated woman to old-fashioned, pretty girl-next-door (quite literally as far as Ben is concerned since the pair live next door to each other). Furthermore, that this transformation functions as a revelation of the natural self rather than of the constructedness of identity is assured both by the film's use of natural, elemental imagery to define the sexes and in a brief exchange between Martin and Laura at the beginning of the film. Laura is preparing for a party when Martin comes up and comments that the dress she is wearing is 'pretty'. Sensing his displeasure, she asks if he was thinking of 'the red', to which he replies that he was thinking of 'the black'. The latter, the archetypal sexy little black dress, is the one Laura ends up wearing. Thus although Laura's reversion to 'pretty' dresses in the second half of the film could be interpreted as an attempt at self-determination, I think this transformation must be understood not only within the context of *Pretty Woman*

and Roberts' star persona, which both rely on what Brunsdon describes as 'a natural model of femininity', but also in terms of the apparent retreat from feminism which occurs in the second half of the film.<sup>12</sup>

If the contemporary setting and feminist inflection given to the various fairy-tale references prevents the first part of *Sleeping with the Enemy* from being seen as 'a reversion to a pre-feminist narrative', the same cannot be said for the second part of the film. Here, various factors combine to conjure up the pre-feminist era of the late 1950s and early 1960s. What is more, these are clearly intended to contrast with the contemporary world of Cape Cod. Indeed, as Colin McArthur has observed, 'the small town here operates as the binary antinomy not, strictly speaking, of the city itself but of [the] "city values"' embodied by Cape Cod.<sup>13</sup> Thus, like many of the rape-revenge films Clover discusses, *Enemy* can be seen as working primarily on a city-country axis. Against Clover, however, I will argue that the sub-antinomies that proceed from the master antinomy of city/Cape Cod versus midwest town are not understandable in terms of class or gender but are instead largely temporal. For example, whereas in the early part of the film the diegetic music consisted of contemporary pop, here it consists of a number of well-known and extremely successful songs from the late 1950s and 1960s: 'The Jet Song' from *West Side Story* (1957), 'My Girl' by The Temptations (1965), 'Brown-eyed Girl' by Van Morrison (1967) and 'Runaround Sue' by Dion (1961). In addition, in contrast to the sophisticated, continental food eaten by Martin and Laura in Cape Cod, Ben and Laura eat plain, old-fashioned American food, such as pot roast and apple pie. Finally,

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Colin McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City', in *The Cinematic City*, ed. by David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 19-45 (p. 24).

Laura exchanges her modern, designer clothes for the long, full skirts and dresses, jeans and fitted tops and cardigans, usually in pastel colours, which were popular with young women in the early 1960s. The film therefore also positions Ben and Laura within the newly defined category of the 'teenager', showing them playing at dressing up, dancing to pop music and going to the fair in an era, it is implied, before feminism caused the relationship between the sexes to turn sour. Indeed, given the marked changes in the colour scheme and lighting of the *mise-en-scène* in this part of the film, we might be forgiven for believing we had suddenly donned a pair of rose-tinted spectacles. In other words, in the Cape Cod sequences high key lighting and a *mise-en-scène* dominated by whites, silvers and blues combine to give a cold, contemporary feel whilst, in the later sequences, low key lighting and a *mise-en-scène* dominated by oranges, browns and pinks combine to produce a nostalgic, rosy glow.

Significantly, many of these features are concurrent with those Steve Neale identifies as elements of a cycle of films he terms the 'new romance', in which, incidentally, he includes *Pretty Woman*.<sup>14</sup> This cycle, Neale argues, involves 'a persistent evocation and endorsement of the signs and values of "old-fashioned" romance' and these include a number of the components outlined above.<sup>15</sup> The most notable of these are the influence of fairy-tales and, in particular, 'the knight-in-shining-armour figure' and the 'use of "standard" songs' and 'nineteenth-century romantic' music.<sup>16</sup> However, Neale also cites signs such as the 'vintage car' and the presence of 'poetry' or 'poetic speech' as signifiers of old-fashioned romance. Both are evident in *Sleeping with the Enemy* and are associated with the character of Ben

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<sup>14</sup> Steve Neale, 'The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today', *Screen*, 33:3 (Autumn 1992), 284-299.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 295-296.



who not only drives a vintage car but, in a long, and otherwise unmotivated sequence, recites a lengthy romantic speech from a play to his students. Furthermore, Neale identifies the old-fashioned values of the new romance as marking a reaction to the nervous romance of the late 1970s and early 1980s in which the 'breakdown of monogamy' was largely blamed on the "post-feminist" woman', thus supporting my contention that *Enemy's* deployment of the old-fashioned motifs of the new romance constitutes an attempt to return to a pre-feminist era.<sup>17</sup>

This, then, is also an era when the issue of domestic and sexual violence against women was, quite literally, 'unspeakable' and the film's evocation of this era through the motifs of the new romance consequently functions to legitimate and account for its suppression of a feminist inspired discourse against domestic violence. In particular, as Neale argues, the elements of infantilism, regression and having fun fundamental to the new romance and apparent in Ben and Laura's relationship 'help to repress or disavow those aspects of "adult" difficulty or "adult" responsibility characteristic of real ("adult") relationships'.<sup>18</sup> However, this repression does not amount to a wholesale disavowal of the domestic violence depicted in the first half of the film. Rather, the film creates a number of opportunities for such a discourse which are simply not taken up. For example, when Ben starts asking Laura awkward questions on their first date, she retorts 'Look I really don't want to talk about this OK' and brushes him off when he notices the cut on her head. Similarly, after returning from the theatre, Ben and Laura start kissing passionately on the stairs. Suddenly Laura gets very upset and tells Ben to stop, but when Ben asks 'God, what

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<sup>17</sup> Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> Steve Neale, 'The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today', *Screen*, 33:3 (Autumn 1992), 284-299 (p. 299).

did he do to you?', Laura merely replies 'Please go'. Nevertheless, the next day the following exchange takes place:

LAURA     What you said is right. I had a husband. He hurt me. I guess I'm just really afraid.

BEN         Of what?

LAURA     Of never getting my life back together.

BEN         It just feels like that. Some day you might surprise yourself.

LAURA     I'm glad you're here.

BEN         Me too.

This discussion, however, is not informed by a feminist critique of *Martin's* behaviour but by Laura's desire to explain *her* behaviour and, while it may initially be about domestic violence, it is ultimately about a developing heterosexual romance.

Furthermore, lest we be tempted to interpret Laura's reticence on the subject of Martin's violent behaviour towards her as simply a matter of her inability to trust another man, her conversation with her mother is similarly evasive. 'God, what did he do...', asks Chloe (Elizabeth Lawrence). 'Doesn't matter now', Laura replies.

Laura's conversation with the woman on the bus as she travels towards this pre-feminist world thus represents one of the few instances where female experience of male violence is articulated and the legal and social system which implicitly supports such behaviour criticized. Along with the swimming lessons Laura takes at the YWCA, this is also the closest the film comes to depicting female bonding or sisterhood. Indeed, that Laura is shown to join the YWCA rather than a support group specifically aimed at addressing domestic violence merely serves to reinforce the film's apparently regressive tendencies.

Insofar as it too articulates a nostalgia for an idealized, pre-feminist past, the second part of *Enemy* can thus, in many ways, be read as an articulation of the backlash against feminism it is widely agreed occurred in the late 1980s under the influence of the New Right. However, because this past must, by necessity, always be re-presented from a contemporary perspective, the attempt to disavow the feminist politics of the intervening period is never entirely successful. Rather, the kind of reinscription and rearticulation of the sixties-in-the-eighties (or early nineties in this instance) we see in *Enemy* and which was, according to David Glover and Cora Kaplan, a key aspect of the New Right's hegemonic project involves, I will argue, not so much a rejection of 60s and 70s radicalism as a negotiation of it, not so much the disavowal of feminism as the production of popular, hegemonic, common-sense versions of it.<sup>19</sup> The film's title is, for example, clearly informed by the kind of radical feminist rhetoric espoused by the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group in 1979:

Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. [...] Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sisters and hinders our struggle.<sup>20</sup>

While the second part of the film ostensibly fails to follow through on the logic of its title, as I hope to have shown, the first part of the film is fairly self-conscious about its deployment of the discourses of both feminism and femininity. Charlotte Brunsdon argues an equivalent point in relation to *Pretty Woman*:

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<sup>19</sup> David Glover and Cora Kaplan, 'Guns in the House of Culture?: Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 213-226 (p. 222).

<sup>20</sup> Leeds, Revolutionary Feminist Group, 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality', in *The Woman Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*, ed. by Mary Evans (London: Fontana, 1982), pp. 63-72 (p. 65).



*Pretty Woman* is very knowing about its retrenchments, simultaneously informed by feminism and disavowing this formation. Thus the narrative scenario, although deeply indebted to the screen history of the whore with the heart of gold, would be unimaginable without second-wave feminist perspectives on sex-work.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, whilst the later sections of *Sleeping with the Enemy* may attempt to render as ‘unspeakable’ the feminist discourses which made the early sections of the film representable, they are not entirely successful. Thus although this part of the film may be interpretable as pre-feminist on the basis of its disavowal of domestic violence, it nevertheless depicts a woman taking her first, tentative steps towards social and financial independence (even if that independence is somewhat compromised by the presence of a man). Indeed, the film’s evocation of a *pre*-feminist era suggests a simultaneous disavowal and acknowledgement of feminism. In other words, by re-locating itself ‘before’ feminism, it simultaneously acknowledges the very existence of an ‘after’ that *is* feminism. Indicative of this ambivalence is the fact that the film specifically chooses to re-locate itself in the 1960s, an era which, although pre-feminist, both heralded profound social upheaval and change and saw proto-feminists such as Betty Friedan struggling to give voice to the ‘problem that has no name’, to speak the, as yet, unspeakable.<sup>22</sup>

It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that the film’s ending attempts to articulate this emerging feminism. Consequently, while the final sequence contains

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<sup>21</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 95.

<sup>22</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

several allusions to the conclusion of the Cinderella story these are subject to revision and transformation. For example, we are reminded again of the tale's central narrative trope (the ball) not only through Martin's reference to the night he taught Laura to dance, but by the fact that he comes bearing a 'glass slipper' in the form of Laura's wedding ring. Here, however, the slipper/ring no longer 'fits' and this rejection of the fairy-tale's conventional narrative resolution is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the film's final frame – a shot of Laura's discarded wedding ring.<sup>23</sup> If Vivian in *Pretty Woman* is “‘saved” through marriage’, then, Laura is ‘saved’ through her rejection of marriage.<sup>24</sup> Yet, in fairy-tales rings are typically invested with magic properties, and this one is no exception. As it lies discarded in the foreground of the frame – whilst in the background Laura embraces the injured Ben – it twinkles in the light and a single ‘ping’ is heard above the soundtrack suggesting that its power and, by extension, the power of romance, has not been entirely vanquished by feminism.

Unlike Vivian, however, Laura does not need a man to save her, such that whilst Vivian re-writes the fairy-tale narrative by claiming that she'll rescue Edward ‘right back’, Laura re-writes it by rescuing *herself*. Thus, whilst *Sleeping with the Enemy* maps the rape-revenge structure across traditionally ‘feminine’ genres such as romance and fairy-tales, it also clearly utilizes those films that have been seen as both enabled by, and a response to, feminism, particularly the slasher or stalker genre. For example, while much of the second half of the film is constructed around the developing romance between Ben and Laura, it is also organized around Martin's

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<sup>23</sup> The motif of the discarded wedding ring occurs in other films in the cycle. See, for example, *The Last Seduction* and *Thelma and Louise*.

<sup>24</sup> Hilary Radner, ‘Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot’, in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 56-76 (p. 61).

pursuit of Laura and thus comes complete with the slasher film's trademark point of view shots. Indeed, Martin's steadfast refusal to die at the end (despite being shot at close range several times) and almost super-human ability to tidy the cupboards *and* stalk his victim suggest clear similarities with the monster of the slasher genre.

Although this construction of the violent husband as psychopathic monster is, in many ways, problematic (for reasons I have outlined in chapter 1), with Ben swiftly dispatched, Laura is able to take her place as the 'final girl' or, more specifically, as the vengeful woman of rape-revenge. Thus Laura's attack on Martin is not only inspired by feminist discourses of self-defence (she incapacitates him by kneeing him in the groin) but is clearly cast as revenge. Training the gun on Martin with one hand and holding the phone in the other, Laura is given the opportunity to take the legitimate, legal solution to the problem of domestic violence. However, as Martin taunts her with ineffectualness of such a response, she calls the police to tell them she has killed an intruder. In line with the film's earlier feminist critique of legal solutions, therefore, and despite crying and shaking almost uncontrollably, Laura shoots Martin in a deliberate and calculated act of anger and revenge.

The rape-transformation-revenge structure is thus clearly discernible within the narrative of *Sleeping with the Enemy*. While here rape is replaced by a more generalized domestic violence, as feminist work in this area has highlighted, domestic violence frequently involves marital rape and there is, in fact, a scene early in the film which suggests that Laura is, indeed, an unwilling participant in her husband's lovemaking. The transformations that subsequently occur are, as I argued in chapter 1, largely a product of the contradictions within and between the discourses of gender and genre across which this structure is deployed. These discourses come into



particular conflict and contest in the film's final sequence which, despite having all the markings of a slasher film, continues to make allusions to the romance genre, for example through Martin's reference to his and Laura's fairy-tale honeymoon. While Laura's violent revenge against Martin apparently signifies a rejection of this fairy-tale, the film's final shot would seem to suggest the possibility of the coexistence of romance and revenge: in the foreground lies Laura's discarded wedding ring, in the middleground the body of the man she has killed and in the background, Laura and Ben embracing. Thus, while *Enemy* maps the rape-revenge structure over both the 'new romance' and the slasher/stalker genres, the transformation Laura undergoes is neither the 'Cinderella transformation' associated with the 'new romance', and *Pretty Woman* in particular, nor the process of 'masculinization' associated with the heroines of the slasher genre. Rather, as the film's emphasis on disguise and dressing up and on the disjunction between different identities suggests, what is at stake here is the movement through, and negotiation of, a range of 'public' femininities. Indeed, Laura's trajectory through the narrative can be seen as indicative of the various transformations in the popular representations of heterosexual femininity that, Charlotte Brunsdon has argued, have occurred over the past three decades in response to feminism.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Laura moves from the 'independent woman' of the 1970s cycle of films, through the 'girly heroine' of films such as *Pretty Woman*, to the 'final girl' of slasher. In the final sequence, however, Laura ultimately emerges as a composite and contradictory figure, combining the resourcefulness, resilience and independence of the 'final girl' with the hyper-femininity of the 'girly heroine' (she

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<sup>25</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 101.

wears, for example, a pale pink dress and her long, curly hair loose). Laura's transformation into a female avenger thus involves not so much a movement *through* these various femininities as a negotiation of them and the understandings of feminism they articulate.

It is, thus, perhaps only within the context of these transformations that we can fully understand *Enemy's* division of its narrative into two distinct and clearly identifiable post- and pre-feminist eras since, in so doing, the film foregrounds the historically specific processes of transformation which, I have argued, the rape-revenge cycle can be seen to articulate. Yet, to all intents and purposes, this is a post-feminist narrative which, by reverting to a pre-feminist era, ostensibly disavows the transformations brought about both by, and within, feminism in the intervening period. What, I want to argue, however, is that precisely the reverse is true and that the film is a particularly good example not only of current popular articulations of feminism but of the meaning of post-feminism itself. Indeed, the film is careful to remind us, through brief incursions of the contemporary world, that its pre-feminist narrative is told very much from a post-feminist perspective. Here, Charlotte Brunsdon's understanding of the term post-feminism proves to be especially illuminating. Brunsdon argues that while the term can be seen to imply a disavowal or rejection of feminism, it only does so if we insist on seeing '1970s feminism as the site of "true" feminism, from which lipstick wearers and shoppers are excluded' but that when used in 'an historically specific sense to mark changes in popularly available understandings of femininity and a woman's place' the term is quite useful.<sup>26</sup> Thus *Enemy's* evocation of both post- and pre-feminist eras must be understood not as a rejection of feminism

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102 and 101 respectively.

*per se* but as a rejection of certain elements of the 1970s radical feminism invoked in its title. In other words, the articulation of both a post- and pre-1970s narrative allows the film to embrace the discourses of heterosexual romance and femininity traditionally rejected by radical feminism, whilst simultaneously demonstrating a certain knowingness and self-consciousness in its deployment of such discourses. Similarly, whilst the film disavows (or maybe simply takes for granted) feminist discourses of domestic violence, it simultaneously embraces the popular representation of the violent and angry woman which those discourses have enabled.

In her analysis of the rape-revenge film and transformation, Carol Clover argues that the rape-revenge film's move into the mainstream has been enabled by earlier, 'low' versions of such films and that this transformation has been accompanied by a concomitant erosion of their progressive politics.<sup>27</sup> In its implication that there was a moment of authenticity that has now passed, Clover's argument is informed by the same kind of binary logic that has tended to mark understandings of post-feminism. Against both these perspectives, I have suggested that the rape-revenge film *and* feminism itself are perhaps better understood not in terms of authentic 'moments' but as 'narratives of transformation'. The various transformations the rape-revenge film has undergone do not, therefore, represent celebrations or rejections of feminism according to their status as 'low' or 'high' respectively, but are rather attempts to negotiate and make sense of the various transformations within feminist thinking during the post-1970 period. Nicci Gerrard provides a succinct summary of these transformations when she observes that: 'We used to say, gladly: I am a feminist.

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<sup>27</sup> Carol Clover, 'High and Low: The Transformation of the Rape-Revenge Movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 76-85.



Then: I am a feminist, but... Then: it depends what you mean by feminism. Then: what is feminism, anyway?'<sup>28</sup> Whilst 'some people label this gradual crumbling of certainties the backlash', the meaning of feminism has, in fact, always been a site of struggle and therefore contradiction.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as I have been arguing, the rape-revenge cycle can be seen as one of the privileged sites on, through and against which these struggles and contradictions are played out and the meanings of feminism produced *and* transformed. The answer to Gerrard's final question can thus be found in popular texts such as *Sleeping with the Enemy* which, through an attempt to reconcile the contradictions between the discourses of feminism and the discourses of femininity, construct a popular version of feminism for the 1990s and, in the process, provide Gerrard with a fifth feminist phase/phrase: 'I may be feminine, but...'.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicci Gerrard, 'The New Feminsim: Hello, boys...', *Observer* (Review), 27 April 1997, p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

### CHAPTER 3

#### RAPE-REVENGE AND MASS CULTURAL FICTIONS OF FEMININITY: THE SILENT ERA TO 1970

While the rape-revenge structure has received its most widespread deployment and dissemination in the post-1970 period, several examples of the structure can be found in the films of the pre-1970 period. Rape and revenge, for example, formed an integral part of one of the earliest and most famous feature films, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Indeed, the themes of defilement and retribution are particularly evident in Griffith's early work, for example in *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and *The Greatest Question* (1919), although they also appear in other films of the period such as *The Wind* (Victor Seastrom, 1928) and *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1929). In order to begin to identify precisely what is specific and significant about the representation of feminism and femininity in articulations of the rape-revenge structure in the post-1970 period, I want to start by looking at some of these earlier examples of the structure. In particular, while I will be arguing that these pre-1970 rape-revenge narratives, like their post-1970s counterparts, emerged at key points in the history of twentieth century gender relations (the late teens/1920s and the late 1940s/1950s), I will argue that, in the absence of the discourses of rape which emerged with the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, these early articulations of the structure did not attempt to tell 'feminist' stories or even, feminine stories, but instead largely functioned to endorse and uphold the traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity inscribed in the genres over which it was mapped.

## RAPE

### The Silent Era: 1915-1929

Given that early film technology lent itself to <sup>expressive</sup> ~~exaggerated~~ forms of representation it is perhaps not surprising that melodrama, along with comedy, formed the mainstay of film production in the early silent era. Both were flourishing forms of popular theatre in the late nineteenth century, and it was from here that the nascent cinema drew both its inspiration and its actors. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis points out:

A specifically generic definition of melodrama [...] would involve theatrical conventions – for example, domestic location, familial conflict, the stock types of brave hero, evil villain, and suffering heroine, the struggle of good and evil, and plot motifs such as kidnap or seduction.<sup>1</sup>

It is in this context that we need to understand the early representation of rape and revenge. In other words, the themes of rape and revenge were particularly suited to the silent melodrama's emphasis on emotional <sup>heightening</sup> ~~hyperbole~~ and the battle between good and evil. This is especially evident in *Broken Blossoms* where the fight between good and evil is embodied in the figure of the Yellow Man (Richard Barthelmess) and Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp). Burrows is an archetypal 'baddie', complete with thick, black, angular eyebrows, a prize-fighter who eventually beats his daughter, Lucy (Lillian Gish), to death. The Yellow Man, on the other hand, is a gentle and peaceful man, a Buddhist eventually driven to violence in order to avenge Lucy's death. Whilst many may want to argue that it is Lucy's death that the Yellow Man avenges, rather than her rape, Julia Lesage has made a convincing case for

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<sup>1</sup> Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, 'The Blossom and the Bole: Narrative and Visual Spectacle in Early Film Melodrama', *Cinema Journal*, 33:3 (Spring 1994), 3-15 (p. 11).



reading the film's famous 'closet scene' as a symbolic rape.<sup>2</sup> There is much evidence to support such a reading, not least that Burrows's fatal beating of Lucy arises out of his belief that she is having a sexual relationship with the Yellow Man and therefore revolves around issues of ownership and possession. Furthermore, the scene is predicated on Burrow's *penetration* of the closet that Lucy has locked herself in and in which she writhes around in a futile attempt to escape this penetration. Lastly, and perhaps, most significantly, the sexual connotations of the final beating and Lucy's death are cemented not only by the fact that they occur on the *bed*, but by the fact that the beating is carried out with a whip handle which, in appearance and positioning, has obvious phallic connotations. Clearly such a symbolic representation of rape allowed Griffith to show much more than he would have been able to do had he depicted an actual rape since, whilst silent film and the codes of melodrama clearly lent themselves to such depictions, standards of decency limited the extent to which rape could be fully represented.<sup>3</sup> Thus other silent films dealing with the issue of rape, such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Greatest Question*, *The Wind* and *Blackmail*, tend to feature only an *attempted* rape.<sup>4</sup>

Griffith, however, was master of even the attempted rape scene and his *The Birth of a Nation* contains no less than two such scenes. Whilst there are clearly some racial tensions at work in Battling Burrows and the Yellow Man's fight for ownership of the white woman in *Broken Blossoms*, *Birth's* 'rape' sequences are far more heavily marked by the relationship between rape and race since one of the

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Lesage, 'Artful Racism, Artful Rape: Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*', in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter Cinema*, ed. by Peter Steven (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1985), pp. 247-268.

<sup>3</sup> According to Richard Schickel, the visual power of the closet scene is such that Griffith was said to have exclaimed after Gish's performance "My God, why didn't you warn me you were going to do that?". Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith and the Birth of Film* (London: Pavilion, 1984), p. 392.

<sup>4</sup> I include *Blackmail* as an example of a silent film since, whilst it was later partly reshot and partly dubbed to make it a sound film, it was originally made as a silent.

potential rapists is a black man (Gus) whilst the other is a 'mulatto' (Lynch). Griffith thus draws heavily on the myth of the black male rapist and this is particularly evident in Gus' pursuit of Flora (Mae Marsh) in the film's first 'rape' sequence. In other words, that the chase takes place in the forest, with Gus (Walter Long) bent double and thus almost on all fours, virtually foaming at the mouth, suggests a man reduced to his base and animalistic instincts. Flora, on the other hand, whilst also connected to the natural world through both her name and her fascinated observation of the forest's small animals, is linked to the purity and innocence of that world.

Again then, there is a reliance here on the melodramatic <sup>expressiveness</sup> ~~exaggeration~~ of the battle between good and evil, purity and bestiality. Yet, whilst evil and bestiality were signalled in these early films in a variety of ways, though most clearly through the figure of the black (Gus), inbred (Lynch) or working-class (Burrows) rapist, it was in the star persona of Lillian Gish that the motif of the pure rape victim found its most cogent expression. Gish starred in four out of the five films under discussion here, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Greatest Question*, *Broken Blossoms* and *The Wind*, and Richard Dyer's analysis of Gish's star persona is suggestive of the ideology behind these early representations of rape. Dyer argues that it is the 'concatenation of gender, race and light that is a key part of [Gish's] stardom', in other words, the way in which she embodies an ideal of white womanhood.<sup>5</sup> While this is most apparent in *The Birth of a Nation*, all Gish's performances, particularly in *Broken Blossoms* and *The Wind*, carry overtones of nineteenth century conceptions of women as bastions of morality and virtue, as redemptive 'Angels in the House'. Such rape narratives therefore function to underline this ideal and to uphold it since whilst in both *Birth*

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Dyer, 'A White Star', *Sight and Sound*, 3:8 (August 1993), 22-24 (p. 24).

and *The Greatest Question*, Gish is saved from rape, more often than not the message is that it is better to die than be despoiled or that rape is tantamount to death. Thus in *Birth* Flora leaps to her death rather than succumb to Gus' lustful intentions and at the end of the film, where the Cameron family are trapped in a cabin besieged by black soldiers, the men prepare to kill the women rather than allow them fall into the hands of the black soldiers. In *Broken Blossoms* the outcome of the 'rape' is Gish's death and in the original ending of *The Wind* Gish runs out into the desert to die after having killed the man who attempted to rape her.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps within this context, then, that we can also understand the fact that these films depict only *attempted* rapes. In other words, in depicting only attempted rapes, the films not only maintain standards of decency, they maintain the purity and innocence of white womanhood.

In this respect, then, Hitchcock's *Blackmail* is something of an anomaly. To start with it is a British film but I include it here not only because of Hitchcock's massive influence on filmmaking worldwide, but because his thematic concerns with both violence against women (*Psycho*, 1960; *The Birds*, 1963; *Frenzy*, 1972) and violent women (*Under Capricorn*, 1949; *Marnie*, 1964) make some reference to his work essential.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, unlike the films discussed above, in *Blackmail* the woman neither dies nor is saved, but kills the man who attempts to rape her and escapes. Nor do the victim or the rapist fit the established stereotypes. Despite the fact that Alice White's surname *suggests* purity and innocence, she is actually flirtatious and coquettish, a woman who willingly goes out with another man, Crewe (Cyril

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<sup>6</sup> According to Gish in her introduction to a television broadcast of the film, the exhibitors disliked the original 'unhappy' ending and it was consequently replaced with a 'happy' ending in which Gish's estranged husband returns and they declare their love for each other.

<sup>7</sup> *Frenzy*, for example, features the rape and murder of several women, whilst the bird attack in *The Birds* has been described by Pam Cook as a 'symbolic "rape"'. Pam Cook, 'Authorship and Cinema', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 114-206 (p. 128).



Ritchard), behind her boyfriend's back. The man turns out to be her rapist and while as a upper-class white artist he does not obviously fit the stereotypes of the black or working-class rapist, his profession and lifestyle do carry connotations of decadence and licentiousness. In many respects, the differences between Griffith's and Hitchcock's articulation of the rape motif has much to do with their own particular obsessions. As Schickel observes: 'One is reminded of how often, before and after *Birth*, Griffith arranged confrontations between the beautiful and the bestial, how obsessive was his belief that innocence must, almost inevitably, be brutally despoiled.'<sup>8</sup> Hitchcock's work, on the other hand, is peopled not with beautiful and innocent heroines, but with beautiful and aberrant ones of which Alice (Anny Ondra) is perhaps the earliest example. Furthermore, whilst both *Broken Blossoms* and *The Birth of a Nation*, despite the latter's added dimension of historical epic, fit almost exactly the definition of melodrama cited above, Hitchcock worked largely in the thriller genre and according to Pam Cook 'objected to the fact that Hollywood produced so many "women's pictures"', ~~in other words, melodramas~~.<sup>9</sup>

As with many representations of rape in this period, Hitchcock manages the delicate nature of his subject matter through the use of a distanced, non-subjective camera and shadows. In other words, it is the shadows that the bodies of the protagonists cast on the wall behind them rather than the characters themselves that we see as the victim and rapist struggle. However, Hitchcock then cuts to a shot of a bed which is hidden from our view by the surrounding curtains and out of which pokes Alice's struggling forearm. That this later shot is not entirely motivated by

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith and the Birth of Film* (London: Pavilion, 1984), p. 233.

<sup>9</sup> Pam Cook, 'Authorship and Cinema', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 114-206 (p. 127).

decorum or convention is suggested by the fact Hitchcock was to repeat this representation of rape, in which the woman's body is fragmented, in the later *Frenzy* where there are repeated shots of Brenda Blaney's ankles and breasts as she is raped by Rusk. What this suggests is that for Hitchcock woman is little more than the sum of her (sexual) body parts. Furthermore, that this fragmented female sexuality is possessed not by the woman herself but by men is made clear through the motif of Alice's lost gloves which she leaves in Crewe's apartment. According to Selim Eyüboğlu, the gloves connote Alice's sexuality: 'Gloves here work as a signifier of a lost object that positions the desire of the "guilty" subject in relation to the desire(s) of the other.'<sup>10</sup> Thus when one of the gloves is taken by her boyfriend, Frank (John Longden), and the other by the blackmailer, Tracey (Donald Calthrop), her body is not only further fragmented, it is further possessed. Indeed, the fact that immediately prior to finding one of the gloves, Frank is shown looking at the female nude Crewe helped Alice paint the previous night further confirms the link between the gloves and female sexuality. The gloves, however, are also the signifier of Alice's guilt which, because of their sexual connotations, function to signify not only that she is guilty of the murder but that she is guilty of precipitating the rape in the first place. Thus contrary to Griffith's melodramatic representation of rape, which functions to construct and uphold the nineteenth century ideal of white womanhood, Hitchcock's representation of rape functions to construct the woman as both a sexual and a guilty subject.

This construction of Alice as a desiring "'guilty" subject' causes Eyüboğlu to argue that the film constructs Alice as a prospective femme fatale.<sup>11</sup> Early silent

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<sup>10</sup> Selim Eyüboğlu, 'The Authorial Text and Postmodernism: Hitchcock's *Blackmail*', *Screen*, 32:1 (Spring 1991), 58-78 (p. 73).

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73.

cinema did indeed tend to represent women as either virgins (as embodied by actresses such as Lillian Gish) or vamps (as embodied by actresses such as Theda Bara) and I will have more to say about the influence of the femme fatale or vamp on subsequent deployments of the rape-revenge structure in chapter 6. In particular, I will argue that the vamp can be seen as an articulation of the anxieties that accompanied the emergence of first-wave feminism in the 1890s. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that the ideal of woman as 'Angel in the House' was actually used to support American suffrage leaders' arguments for the female vote. As Nancy McGlen and Karen O'Connor have observed, suffrage leaders 'claimed that the ballot would enable women to reform society, a task that they were particularly suited to *as women*' on the basis of 'the inherent incorruptibility of women and their acknowledged superior moral character'.<sup>12</sup> With the winning of the vote in 1920, however, a new female stereotype emerged, one with which Alice is much more closely associated – that of the emancipated 'new woman'. While, as Molly Haskell has pointed out, the 'new woman' was 'either a suffragette or a flapper, depending on what she wanted and how she chose to get it', it was the image of the flapper that most frequently found its way into the films of the period.<sup>13</sup> According to Haskell, the flapper 'wanted social and sexual, rather than political and intellectual, power'.<sup>14</sup> In dress and manner, Alice is clearly constructed in this image: she wears the cloche hat popular with women in the 1920s, a fur-trimmed coat and behaves flirtatiously with the men she meets. Likewise, Alice is clearly attracted to Crewe's upper-class, decadent life-style and to the apparent sexual power she wields over him. These

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy E. McGlen and Karen O'Connor, *Women's Rights: The Struggle for Equality in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Praeger, 1983), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (London: New English Library, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44.



associations are cemented in the song Crewe sings as Alice undresses in readiness to have her portrait painted – ‘Miss Up-to-Date’ – at the conclusion of which Crewe comments ‘that’s a song about you my dear’.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the song’s lyrics are indicative of the ideology behind the representation of Alice as ‘new woman’. In other words, while ostensibly constructed as a defence of ‘Miss Up-to-Date’, the song simultaneously chronicles the backlash against the emancipated woman, significantly constructing her against the ‘woman of the past age’. For example:

They praise the woman of the past age,  
And loath her daughter of this last age,  
They sing a hymn of hate about Miss Up-to-Date,  
And spend their spite from morn to night.

Continuing with the lines ‘they say you’re wild, a naughty child Miss Up-to-Date/a goofy few predict for you an awful fate’, this ‘hymn of hate’ is clearly endorsed by the events that follow (Crewe’s attempted rape of Alice). Moreover, later, as Alice roams the streets having killed Crewe by stabbing him with a carving knife, the film specifically links her crime with her role as a ‘new woman’. ‘Miss Up-to-Date’, as the song has pointedly reminded us, is partial to ‘a cocktail or two’, thus in this sequence there is a point-of-view shot of Alice staring absently at a neon advertisement for Gordon’s Gin. Surrounded by the words, ‘The Heart of a Good Cocktail’ is a moving cocktail shaker which gradually turns into an image of a hand

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out here, as Molly Haskell does, that the flapper was nevertheless an ambiguous figure, ‘a woman torn [...] between Old World propriety and the new morality’ (ibid., p. 81), between the asexual virgin and the emancipated ‘new woman’. This ambiguity is articulated, in particular, through the outfit Alice changes into – a ballerina’s tutu. As Richard Dyer has argued: ‘The Romantic ballet constructed a translucent, incorporeal image. Yet the ballerina was also always a flesh and blood woman showing her legs’. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 131.

holding a knife which moves in stabbing motions, the implication being that the transition from 'new woman' to murderess is but a small one. To the left of this central image is the slogan 'Gordon's, White for Purity'. The connection made here between Alice's surname and the accoutrements of the 'new woman' not only further serves to confirm her role as Miss Up-to-Date, but functions as an ironic comment on the inappropriateness of her surname (Alice is clearly neither sexually or morally 'pure'). Finally, that the film represents an articulation of the backlash against Miss Up-to-Date evident in the song is apparent not only in the way in which the film subsequently effects a transformation of Alice into the asexual 'woman of the past age' (on returning home she changes into a floral dress and a shapeless cardigan), but in the 'awful fate' awaiting Alice in Hitchcock's intended ending. In this ending, Alice does not escape but is pursued, caught and locked up in a cell.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their differences, the question that remains, however, is to what extent these early films are actually *about* rape and its effects, the extent to which they can be described as rape *narratives*. I have already explored the way in which Lillian Gish's role in several of these films functions to uphold an ideal of white womanhood and thus, in *The Birth of a Nation* in particular, rape appears simply as a narrative motif in the film's larger ideological project of defining white male supremacy. In *Broken Blossoms* and *The Wind*, while the narrative appears to centre more on the woman's story, the positioning of the rape at the end of the narrative leaves little room for the exploration of its consequences beyond the message that rape itself is a resolution, an end point tantamount to death. Finally, in *Blackmail*, although the rape occurs near the beginning of the film, the subsequent emphasis is

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<sup>16</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, 'Direction', in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. by Albert J. LaValley (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 32-39 (p. 33).

not on Alice's rape but on the consequences of her murder of her rapist. Thus it is the murder rather than the rape which is replayed throughout the film in the repeated stress, both symbolically and aurally, on knives, an emphasis which, moreover, serves to position Alice as guilty party rather than victim. Indeed, as the title of the film and its narrative trajectory suggests, if Alice is a victim at all, she is the victim of blackmail rather than rape. Within the wider ideological project of the film as a whole, however, Alice is the victim of the backlash against the emancipated 'new woman' which occurred in the 1920s.

### **The Sound Era: 1930-1970**

While this section spans the period from 1930 to 1970, the earliest example of the rape-revenge structure I was able to find was *Johnny Belinda* (Jean Negulesco, 1948). Like the previous examples, then, the articulations of the rape-revenge structure I will be discussing in this section span a period of profound upheaval in gender relations. While the feminist movement largely lay dormant during this time, the second world war brought about its own form of female emancipation. During the war, as men went off to fight, leaving factories and offices quite literally 'unmanned', women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers. The post-war backlash against the working woman, the drive to push her back into the home, cannot, however, be understood simply in economic terms (that is, in terms of the fact that, with war production over and a returned male workforce, there simply were not enough jobs to go around). Rather, as Jackie Byars has observed: 'A family-centred culture became America's bulwark [...] against the insecurity caused by the discovery of atomic energy, and against communism.'<sup>17</sup> Thus the family came to

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<sup>17</sup> Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 79.



stand for the unity and moral integrity of the nation as a whole. The desire to return women to their roles as wives and mothers, consequently also arose from the belief that the working woman compromised the moral integrity of the family/nation, from the fear, in other words, that the working woman was not only financially independent but sexually independent and available as well. As a narrative motif, rape would appear to be ideally suited to conveying the dangers of (sexual) independence and encouraging a return to the family. Thus, whether she is a working woman or not, in the articulations of the rape-revenge structure in this period, rape functions in various and complex ways to position the heroine within the traditional feminine career of wife and/or mother. Given that the late 1940s and 1950s are seen by many to be the golden age of melodrama or the 'woman's film', it should perhaps come as no surprise that, during this period, female-centred deployments of the rape-revenge structure such as *Johnny Belinda* and *Outrage* (Ida Lupino, 1950) appeared solely in this genre. Indeed, as I hope to show, the combination of the rape-revenge structure and the codes and conventions of melodrama worked to forcefully reinscribe women's role within the family.<sup>18</sup>

In *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda (Jane Wyman) is rejected by her family, partly because her birth caused her mother's death and partly because she is deaf and mute. In her discussion of the 'woman's film', Mary Ann Doane argues that: 'This muteness is in some ways paradigmatic for the genre. For it is ultimately the symptoms of the female body which "speak" while the woman as subject of discourse is inevitably absent.'<sup>19</sup> Thus when we first meet Belinda it is her body, her

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<sup>18</sup> *Dona Barbara* (Fernando de Fuentes, 1943) represents a particularly interesting example of this combination. Unfortunately, as a Mexican film, it is outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 67-82 (p. 76).

dirty and dishevelled appearance, that signifies her position outside of the feminine sphere of the family. As Doane points out, in the 'woman's film'

the female body is located not so much as a spectacle but as an element in the discourse of medicine, a manuscript to be read for the symptoms of her story, her identity. Hence the need, in these films, for the figure of the doctor as reader or interpreter, as the site of knowledge which dominates and controls female subjectivity.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, in *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda is befriended by the hero, Doctor Robert Richardson (Lew Ayres), who teaches her sign language and who thus, quite literally, becomes the interpreter of the signs she subsequently makes with her body. Moreover, in line with Doane's suggestion that what the doctor's active reading of the female body constructs is an identity, under Richardson's tutelage Belinda is transformed from a neglected child known only as 'The Dummy' into a beautiful young woman, is made 'feminine'.<sup>21</sup> For Belinda, however, the consequence of this transformation is her rape at the hands of one of the locals who visits her father's farm, an event that leads her to again reject the accoutrements of heterosexual femininity. While Richardson at first misdiagnoses Belinda's physical neglect (interpreting it as the symptom of loneliness), another doctor's examination of Belinda's body reveals that she is pregnant and this diagnosis then becomes subsumed into Richardson's initial misdiagnosis (he tells Belinda that, as a mother, she will never be lonely again). Thus, despite the fact that Belinda's body attempts to

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps worth mentioning here the similarities with another melodrama of the period, *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942). Like Belinda, Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) is an unloved 'ugly duckling' transformed both physically and psychically by a *doctor*, the famous psychiatrist Doctor Jacquith (Claude Rains).

speak 'the symptoms of her story', the symptoms of rape are repeatedly reinterpreted as the symptoms of motherhood. Here, then, rape reinterpreted as motherhood not only brings the dysfunctional family together, but results in Belinda's further 'feminization' as a mother. This privileging of the maternal and the familial over women's experience of, and responses to, rape is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the film's title which, in defining its heroine in terms of her feminine role as mother to 'Johnny', suggests that it is the definition and control of female subjectivity rather than Belinda, and her experiences, which are the 'subject' of this 'woman's film'.

In contrast, *Outrage*'s title clearly announces the film's attitude towards rape and while, like *Johnny Belinda*, the film also maps the rape-revenge structure over the codes and conventions of melodrama, as Pam Cook has observed:

Feminist study of the genre has emphasized its creation of a "feminine", domesticated world in which women's experience and point of view are privileged, not least by the employment of *mise en scène* and sound to convey heightened affect.<sup>22</sup>

She therefore goes on to argue that:

In *Outrage* the moralistic, punitive trajectory of the narrative is undercut and commented on by the visual and auditory codes, which are used expressionistically to convey Ann's state of mind and existential predicament.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Pam Cook, 'Outrage', in *Queen of the 'B's: Ida Lupino Behind the Camera*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), pp. 57-72 (p. 60).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.



Cook's analysis, however, provides little evidence to support such claims, and in fact, most of her observations about the film would actually seem to support a reading of its narrative as 'moralistic' and 'punitive'. Cook's discussion of *Outrage* is, nevertheless, interesting for the way in which she analyses the film both in terms of melodrama and in terms of the rape-revenge genre as it has been defined by Carol Clover. This allows her not only to map historical changes between the two genres but also to explore some of the limitations of Clover's approach. According to Cook:

The rape-revenge reading produces a view of *Outrage* diametrically opposed to that produced by the melodrama reading. The first sees the film as endorsing the female victim position, while the second sees it as putting the drama of female subjectivity centre-stage.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, in comparing *Outrage* with the post-1970s rape-revenge films discussed by Clover, Cook's analysis, not unexpectedly, reveals that the film 'falls far short of the ideological disturbances detected by Clover in her 1970s and 1980s feminist-influenced examples'.<sup>25</sup> My project here, whilst similarly concerned to explore the way in which the rape-revenge structure functioned in the pre-1970 period, is informed by a somewhat different approach. Rather than producing a comparative reading of *Outrage* across different generic and historical contexts, my purpose is to explore the effects of the *intersection* between the rape-revenge structure and the codes and conventions of melodrama within the specific historical and ideological context of post-war America I outlined at the beginning of this section.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66.

What I want to argue in particular, is that in *Outrage* rape is cast as a threat to the 'feminine' career of heterosexual romance and family. Thus the beginning of the film is centred around the heroine, Ann's, embarkation on this career, with her boyfriend's proposal of marriage and her parent's blessing on their subsequent engagement. However, on an evening on which Ann (Mala Powers) has worked late and must walk home alone in the dark, she is raped. The film consequently sets up an opposition between the two careers open to women in the post-war period – marriage or work – an opposition underlined by Ann's colleague, who comments to her during a coffee break that she has to return to work since 'You're the one that's getting married, I need my job'. Yet, whilst in line with the post-war drive to get women back into the home, the rape is clearly shown to be a consequence of the latter rather than the former career, after the rape Ann rejects fiancé and family and flees the city for the country where she is taken in by a preacher, named Doc (Tod Andrews). The preacher's name, however, is, of course, significant, since like Doctor Richardson in *Johnny Belinda*, it is his role to 'cure' Ann of her rejection of the 'feminine' career and return her to fiancé and family.<sup>26</sup> As I argued earlier, this emphasis on the need for the standard family can be seen as a response to the crisis of national identity that occurred after the war. Indeed, if, as Cook suggests, the rape can be read as symptomatic the United States' own lost innocence, then Ann's trajectory through the narrative can be seen as an attempt to recover that innocence through a return to family values.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the rape is also shown as arising from the disturbances to

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<sup>26</sup> That Ann needs to be 'cured' is further underlined by the fact that at her trial for assaulting Frank, a man she believes is going to rape her, it is recommended that she undergo psychiatric treatment for the period of one year. Ann's transformation, unlike the physical transformation that occurs in *Johnny Belinda*, is therefore largely psychical.

<sup>27</sup> Pam Cook, 'Outrage', in *Queen of the 'B's: Ida Lupino Behind the Camera*, ed. by Annette Kuhn (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1995), pp. 57-72 (p. 62).

family life, and the traditional gender relations inscribed therein, brought about by the war. In other words, not only is the rape constructed as a consequence of women's work outside the home, the rapist is constructed as a victim of the trauma inflicted by war and of what Cook describes as 'postwar impaired masculinity'.<sup>28</sup> Hence, as Cook observes: 'The rapist is absolved of guilt [...] with the consequence that the specificity of Ann's experience of rape is subsumed into the rapist's experience of war, and both are perceived as neurotics who need to be cured.'<sup>29</sup> This 'cure', as I have suggested, involves reasserting traditional gender roles through a return to family values.

Whilst *Outrage* is ostensibly framed as Ann's story, the second half of the film tends to shift the focus from Ann to Doc, with Ann merely playing the passive role to Doc's active role of 'healer'. Like *Johnny Belinda*, then, *Outrage*'s deployment of the rape-revenge structure across the ~~codes and conventions of melodrama~~ <sup>women's film</sup> would appear to similarly deny Ann the opportunity to articulate her experience of rape and to become the subject of her own story. Thus, despite the fact that ~~melodrama~~ or the 'woman's film' purports to articulate a female point of view, the women in both these films are never allowed to speak for themselves. Rather, as is indicated most forcefully in the trial scenes at the end of each film, it is the role of the doctor to speak for the woman and thus to define and control her. What I want to suggest is that the deployment of the rape-revenge structure colludes in the ideological project of these 'women's films'. In other words, by including as a central narrative motif an event which, at the time was not only unrepresentable, but quite literally,

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 61.



unspeakable, the films are able to legitimate the erosion of the woman's story from their narratives.

The remaining articulations of the rape-revenge structure in this period demonstrate an even more pervasive emphasis on the male protagonist and thus a concomitant disavowal of women's experiences of, and responses to, rape, not least because in two of them (*Rancho Notorious*, Fritz Lang, 1952 and *The Virgin Spring*, Ingmar Bergman, 1959) the victim dies and the subsequent emphasis is therefore on the hero's revenge.<sup>30</sup> This increasing repression of a female perspective is marked, in particular, by a shift from the codes and conventions of melodrama to those of the western (*Rancho Notorious*) and the medieval fable (*The Virgin Spring*). I will consequently discuss these films at greater length in the section on revenge. For now I want to turn to Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) which, despite the shift from melodrama to courtroom drama, would seem to offer the woman the opportunity to tell her story.

Like Hitchcock's *Blackmail* which appeared at the tail end of the silent era, *Anatomy of a Murder* appeared towards the end of the era of the production code, and there is a sense in which as a result both are watershed films quite different from anything that has gone before them. In as much, both depart from the conventional representation of the raped woman in both the silent and the production code eras as innocent victim and Preminger's work, like Hitchcock's, shows a preoccupation with the representation of 'woman as enigma'.<sup>31</sup> Thus whilst *Anatomy's* narrative is ostensibly centred around establishing the guilt or innocence of Lieutenant Manion

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<sup>30</sup> Despite being a Swedish film, I include a discussion of *The Virgin Spring* here because of its huge influence on subsequent deployments of the rape-revenge structure. The film, for example, provided the inspiration for one of the first, post-1970s articulations of the structure, *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Preminger's *Laura* (1944) and Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964).

(Ben Gazzara), on trial for the murder of a bartender who allegedly raped his wife, Laura (Lee Remick), it is ultimately the question of whether or not Laura was raped and her guilt or innocence in this matter that becomes central to the narrative. Consequently, unlike the films discussed previously in which rape, if not directly represented, was always *visually* signalled within the diegesis, in *Anatomy* the alleged rape not only occurs outside of the narrative framework but it is never visually represented or signalled within that framework. Furthermore, whilst like the later *The Accused* (1988) attention is drawn to the victim's physical injuries as 'evidence' of rape, like that film also, such evidence is undermined through the construction of the victim as a woman who is sexually inviting in both appearance and behaviour and who also frequents bars alone. Nevertheless, whereas *The Accused* resolved the issue of the victim's guilt or innocence by representing the rape in flashback through the eyes of a male witness at the end of the film, in *Anatomy* we have only the oral testimony of two women, Laura herself and the rapist's stepdaughter, Mary Pilant (Kathryn Grant), as proof of Laura's 'innocence'. Although the jury accept these testimonies and Lieutenant Manion is acquitted, the final scene of the film in which his lawyer, Paul Biegler (James Stewart), goes to the Manion's mobile home to collect his fee only to find that Manion has left a note citing the legal precedent of 'irresistible impulse' used to help acquit him as an excuse to leave without paying, throws the court's verdict, and consequently the existence of the rape, into question.<sup>32</sup> Thus, despite the opportunity given to Laura to articulate her experience of rape, this is not a 'woman's story' but one in which, as

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<sup>32</sup> This is suggestive of a further similarity with *The Accused*, in which the legal case also rested on a rare legal precedent ('criminal solicitation').

Richard Lippe has observed, 'the primary issue at stake is male identity and power and the ability of the male to manipulate a situation to his advantage'.<sup>33</sup>

However, despite the way in which *Anatomy*'s narrative structure tends to deny or question the existence of rape, perhaps more than any other film of the pre-1970 period, it contributed to making rape 'speakable'. In other words, whilst unlike *Anatomy* earlier films always visually *implied* the threat or occurrence of rape, rape was simultaneously shown to be visually *unrepresentable*. For example, in *Johnny Belinda*, Belinda's fate is visually implied by a shadow falling over her as she cowers back but, like *Anatomy*, the actual rape is visually absent as the screen fades to black. Yet, whilst in *Johnny Belinda* this absence functions to render rape as both unrepresentable and, despite Belinda's new found communication skills, unspeakable, in *Anatomy* the visual absence of rape functions to create a narrative lacuna as a result of which rape must and does become speakable. Nevertheless, although *Anatomy* can be seen as indicative of the increasing openness towards sex and sexuality which occurred in the 1950s and which would lead, in the late 1960s, to women beginning to speak out about sexual violence, as yet there was still no way of thinking about rape from a female perspective.<sup>34</sup> Like the films discussed above, therefore, *Anatomy* is not *about* rape or women's experience of rape. Rather, as I have been endeavouring to argue and will continue to show, rape functioned largely to endorse and uphold traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Lippe, 'Anatomy of a Murder', in *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*, ed. by Nicholas Thomas, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 5 vols (Chicago: St. James Press, 1990), I, 38-40 (p. 40).

<sup>34</sup> For example, the Kinsey Report on male sexuality was published in 1948, with the report on female sexuality following in 1953. *Playboy* magazine also appeared for the first time in 1953. It was ten years, however, before the first feminist investigation into femininity and female sexuality was published – Betty Friedan's, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). For an extremely interesting discussion of the way in which the discourses about sexuality circulating in the 1950s were embodied in the star persona of Marilyn Monroe see: Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).



### Rapists and their Victims

I have already demonstrated how, in early silent films, the rape victim is largely represented as innocent and, with the exception of *Blackmail* and *Anatomy of a Murder*, this is also true of the rest of the films I have discussed. These exceptions are to some extent suggestive of the motivation behind the representation of the innocent rape victim, at least in those films which represent male revenge. In other words, if, in *Anatomy*, Laura's appearance and behaviour threw the existence of the rape and thus the legitimacy of her husband's revenge into question, in films such as *Rancho Notorious* and *The Virgin Spring*, the victim's innocence would appear to function to help legitimate male revenge. The purity of the woman is largely assured by making her either a child (Flora in *Birth*, Lucy in *Broken Blossoms*, Belinda in *Johnny Belinda* and Karin in *The Virgin Spring*) or by defining her in relation to marriage as either a fiancée (Elsie in *Birth*, Ann in *Outrage* and Beth in *Rancho Notorious*) or a wife (Letty in *The Wind*). Even the less than innocent heroines of *Blackmail* and *Anatomy* are respectively girlfriend and wife. Moreover, whilst the roles of fiancée and wife clearly define these women in relation to men rather than as individuals, even the children are male-identified since, apart from Karin (Brigitta Pettersson) in *The Virgin Spring*, their fathers are present whilst their mothers are dead or absent.

With the exception of *Broken Blossoms*, in which father and rapist are one and the same, these fathers, husbands and fiancés in part function as signifiers of a 'good' and 'honourable' white masculinity against which the rapists' difference and deviance can be defined.<sup>35</sup> Thus the rapist is represented variously as black (Gus in

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<sup>35</sup> As I have pointed out in my discussion of *Broken Blossoms* above, however, the characterization of Burrows as rapist similarly relies on comparing his violence and womanizing unfavourably with the Yellow Man's gentleness and chastity.

*Birth*), inbred (Lynch in *Birth*), a potential bigamist (Roddy Wirt in *The Wind*), an artist (Crewe in *Blackmail*), a violent womanizer (Locky McCormick in *Johnny Belinda*), a convicted criminal (in *Outrage*), an outlaw (Kinch in *Rancho Notorious*), and as goatherds (in *The Virgin Spring*).<sup>36</sup> Even in *Anatomy of a Murder*, where the rapist is characterized simply as a bartender, the husband still holds the superior moral ground as a lieutenant in the United States army. In this way, then, rape is constructed not as a product of heterosexual power relations but as the deed of a minority of 'abnormal' men who are represented as distinct from the majority who make up 'normal', patriarchal society. Some of the later films also construct similar oppositions between their female characters, using deviations from the established standards of feminine behaviour in order to underline the rape victim's goodness and purity. For example, in *Johnny Belinda* Belinda is contrasted with the vain and worldly Stella McGuire (Jan Sterling). In *Rancho Notorious* the hero's raped and murdered fiancée, Beth (Gloria Henry), finds her other in the femme fatale, Altar Keane (Marlene Dietrich). Finally, and perhaps most clearly, in *The Virgin Spring* the blonde and virginal Karin is opposed to her pregnant and unmarried dark-haired foster sister, Ingeri (Gunnel Lindblom).

In the films of the pre-1970 period rape would therefore appear to function to endorse and uphold traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity and these films consequently often allow little room for the change or transformation of such categories. Indeed, in many of these films no discernible change or transformation takes place. This may be largely due to the limited passage of time between the occurrence of the rape and the taking of revenge or the victim's death. Even when

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting here, as Robin Wood does in his analysis of *The Virgin Spring*, that 'goats are traditionally symbolic of lust, and [are] used as such in association with the goatherds'. Robin Wood, *Ingmar Bergman* (London: Studio Vista, 1969), p. 102.

transformation does hold a central position in the narrative, however, it remains to be seen whether it is the raped or avenging person who is transformed, given that they are not always the same person, and what the ideological implications of such transformation may be. It is therefore the way in which the films of the pre-1970 period articulate this central structuring convention of the rape-revenge narrative that I will be exploring in the next section.

## TRANSFORMATION

I have already pointed out how rape often *results in* the rejection of the 'feminine' career and how the transformation that subsequently takes place functions to restore the heroine to her proper 'feminine' vocation within the confines of heterosexual romance and family. However, rape can also be seen to *result from* such a rejection of the 'feminine' career and here it is rape itself which is transformative, functioning to re-position the heroine as wife, fiancée or girlfriend. For example, in *The Birth of a Nation*, Elsie (Lillian Gish) breaks off her engagement with Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) because of his involvement with the Ku Klux Klan and it is only after her near rape at the hands of Lynch (George Siegmann) that they are reunited. Similarly in *The Wind*, Letty (Lillian Gish) rejects her husband, Lige (Lars Hanson), until she is nearly raped by Roddy Wirt (Montagu Love) whereupon she declares her true love for him. Finally, in *Blackmail* Alice stands her boyfriend, Frank, up to go out with another man who attempts to rape her but becomes dependent on Frank when she is subsequently threatened by a blackmailer. That the narrative resolutions, and indeed the final shots, of all three films centre around the reunited couple further serves to underline the message that a woman's proper place is within an heterosexual relationship. Thus, as I suggested in my discussion of both *Blackmail* and *Outrage*, these films can, in many ways, be seen as a response to historical



contexts in which women were increasingly rejecting traditional feminine images and roles. In other words, in these films, rape can be seen as functioning both as a 'warning' and a corrective to women who step outside of their designated position within society.

Those films that do not rely on restoring the heroine's 'femininity' or teaching her her proper place through rape or its consequences tend, nevertheless, to effect a concomitant transformation or punishment of the heroine's other or double. Thus, in *Johnny Belinda*, Stella must undergo the humiliation of admitting publicly not only that she married a rapist, but that she was willing to violate the sanctity of the mother-child relation. In *The Virgin Spring* Ingeri's remorse for her part in Karin's rape and murder and renunciation of evil are apparent in her confession to Karin's father and in her purification at the virgin spring. Finally, in *Rancho Notorious*, Altar must pay with her life for her involvement with the 'masculine' world of crime and for harbouring outlaws (including Beth's rapist), although not before the hero, Vern (Arthur Kennedy), has made her change from her usual masculine attire into her finest and most feminine clothes.

As this latter example suggests, the transformation of the female character is frequently a process effected by the male character. Moreover, such transformations do not always occur as *a result of* rape but can in fact contribute to its occurrence. Thus, for example, in *Broken Blossoms* it is the Yellow Man's 'feminization' of Lucy – he bathes her, changes her rags for a robe and gives her a doll – and his sexualization of her – his attempt to kiss her – that makes her 'rapable'. Likewise, in *Johnny Belinda*, Doctor Richardson effects an analogous 'feminization' of Belinda with similar consequences. Nevertheless, whilst the heroine's responses to rape in *Johnny Belinda* and *Outrage* suggest a recognition that it is femininity that engenders

rape, their subsequent rejection of femininity and its accoutrements is not represented as the central narrative transformation, which instead again charts their 'feminization' by *male* agents. Indeed, even this narrative division of labour, in which women are defined merely as passive victims whilst men are given the active role of bringing about change and transformation, serves to endorse and restore traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Yet it is not always the lack or rejection of femininity that is represented as a problem to be solved by the male character in these films, as evidenced by the fact that in *Anatomy of a Murder* it is the *excess* of femininity which is shown to be problematic. Moreover, *Anatomy* illustrates that if it is femininity that makes women 'rapable', then it is also femininity that makes them 'not rapable'. In other words, Laura's excessive femininity and sexuality calls into question whether she was raped or whether she consented to intercourse and thus threatens not only her husband's trial, but the career of his lawyer, Paul Biegler. Biegler therefore transforms Laura making her wear a girdle, box suit, brim hat and glasses and in so doing makes her conform to notions of respectable femininity. Thus, these films, whilst involved in some complicated negotiations with the meaning of femininity, are ultimately not about *transforming* but about *conforming*, are about positioning and fixing their female characters within established and accepted feminine roles. Nevertheless, in the figure of Laura, who encompasses both the 'good' and the 'bad' female character of previous films, we can begin to see an ambivalence towards the different meanings of femininity and an inability to completely define and control it, as Laura changes back into her old clothes and remains enigmatic to the end.

Not surprisingly there is no equivalent female intervention on the rare occasions that it is the male protagonist who undergoes some form of transformation.

Nevertheless, for both male and female characters transformation is shown to arise out of the violation of rape. In other words, for female characters rape is represented as both a result of, and a violation of, their femininity and for male characters as a violation of their masculine ability to protect women. Yet, whilst women's responses to rape are often shown to result in an unnatural rejection of femininity which must be rectified, men's responses to rape are shown to arise out of nothing more than natural and normal masculine behaviour. Thus, in *Broken Blossoms*, *Rancho Notorious* and *The Virgin Spring*, rape is shown to transform peaceful and religious or law-abiding men into violent and vengeful ones, a transformation which, unlike those of their female counterparts, is never subject to question, intervention or further change. Indeed, whether the hero is transformed or transforming, it is his role to bring about narrative resolution and restore the status quo and his actions are consequently rarely open to criticism or debate. This becomes particularly apparent when we look at the way in which these films articulate the motif of revenge.

## REVENGE

To what extent, then, is it fair to categorize these films as rape-revenge narratives?

Clearly, the death of the rapist or rapists in all but one (*Outrage*) of these films would certainly seem to suggest the presence of an element of revenge. However, an analysis of by whom the rapist/s is killed, why and with what consequences yields some interesting and significant results. To start with it is possible to divide the films into three categories: primary, secondary and 'displaced' revenge. Primary revenge refers to instances in which the rapist is killed by his victim, whilst secondary revenge refers to those cases in which he is killed by someone other than his victim, most usually a family member or loved one. The final category, displaced revenge, covers instances in which, while the rapist is not killed, another man or men is made



to suffer in his place (for example, *Outrage*, in which the heroine assaults a man she mistakes for her rapist). As this example suggests, moreover, displaced revenge is, in most cases, a sub-category of primary revenge. However, in the films discussed above, examples of primary revenge are also in a sense 'displaced', cast either as self-defence (*The Wind*, *Blackmail*) or as defence of a child (*Johnny Belinda*). It is thus only in the films in which revenge is secondary (*Birth*, *Broken Blossoms*, *Rancho Notorious*, *The Virgin Spring* and *Anatomy*) that it is also represented as genuine. Moreover, whilst as a category, secondary revenge can include revenge taken by a woman on behalf of another woman, the absence of the victim's mother in all but one of these films functions to deny the possibility of a secondary female avenger. Indeed, even in *The Virgin Spring*, where the mother is present, she is not involved in the killing of the rapists and it was thus not until *Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972) that the mother of the victim was shown to participate in the revenge. In all of the cases cited above, then, revenge is taken by men.

Whilst, by its very nature, the family or conjugal relation involved in secondary revenge helps to legitimate it, in these cases one cannot help but feel that the fact that acts of violence and retribution are 'naturally' associated with masculinity lends additional justification. Thus whilst in films featuring secondary revenge, the rape of a loved one is shown to be sufficient justification for male violence to go unexplained and unpunished,<sup>37</sup> in those featuring female violence or revenge, the presence of additional extenuating circumstances or punishment suggests that rape is not seen as sufficient justification for such 'unnatural' behaviour. For example, in the original ending of *The Wind* Letty runs out into the desert to die after shooting the

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<sup>37</sup> For example, in *The Virgin Spring*, whilst Töre (Max von Sydow) atones for his revenge by promising to build a church on the spot where his daughter was raped and murdered, he is also 'rewarded' by the miraculous appearance of the virgin spring.

man who raped her. In *Blackmail*, Alice is punished both for her 'forwardness' with the artist and for his murder by finding herself threatened by a blackmailer (and in Hitchcock's intended ending, by imprisonment). Finally, in both *Johnny Belinda* and *Outrage*, the heroines are brought to trial for their acts of violence against men, which are subsequently explained not in terms of rape itself but in terms of Belinda's attempt to defend her child and Ann's 'temporary insanity'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, as the 'happy' endings of the latter two films suggest, when female violence or revenge is cast in terms of feminine identity (motherhood, emotional instability) it tends to be more legitimate and less punishable than when it represents a deviation from that identity, for example, in *Blackmail* where Alice's rape and thus her 'revenge' are cast as a consequence of her occupation of the role of the 'new woman'.

In 1977, the radical feminist Robin Morgan wrote: 'Knowing our place is the message of rape – as it was for blacks the message of lynchings. Neither is an act of spontaneity or sexuality – they are both acts of political terrorism.'<sup>39</sup> Whether Morgan's analysis is true of rape in general, it would certainly seem to be applicable to the representations of rape discussed above. Emerging at key points in the history of United States' gender relations, at times when women were beginning to step outside their designated positions within society, the rape-revenge structure, as I have attempted to show, functioned in various and complex ways to endorse and uphold traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Central to the ideological project of these rape-revenge narratives was the articulation of various 'rape myths',

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<sup>38</sup> Whilst in *Anatomy of a Murder* Lieutenant Manion is also brought to trial for his act of revenge, despite the 'irresistible impulse' plea, his behaviour is explained solely in terms of his wife's rape and 'normal' masculine behaviour.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape', in *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 134-140 (p. 135). First published in Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (1977).

for example: that rapists are insane; that when a woman says 'no' she really means 'yes'; that the rapist is inherently different from the average male; that 'bad' girls are 'asking for it'; that most rapists are black. As I have suggested, for example, in films such as *The Birth of a Nation*, the myth of the black male rapist functioned to construct rape as a fate worse than death (insofar as it suggested that it was better to die than be despoiled) and thus to uphold the myth of white womanhood. The equation of rape with death in films such as *Birth, Blossoms, Rancho Notorious* and *The Virgin Spring* also contributed to making rape, quite literally, unspeakable, whilst in films such as *Johnny Belinda* and *Outrage* its manifestation in physical or psychical symptoms put the articulation and interpretation of rape firmly into the hands of the male doctor. Finally, in constructing rape as not only equivalent to, but as frequently resulting in, death, these films worked to deny the possibility of a female avenger (elsewhere, as I have suggested, this possibility was denied by the displacement and/or punishment of female revenge). In the 1970s, however, feminists such as Susan Griffin, Susan Brownmiller and Robin Morgan began to challenge the male definitions of rape and gender inscribed in these rape myths. In the process, they contributed not only to making rape speakable but to the construction of the female avenger herself.<sup>40</sup> As Carol Clover argues, one of feminism's main donations to popular culture is 'the image of the angry woman – a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator [...] of the kind of

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Griffin, 'Rape: The All American Crime' (1970) reprinted as 'The Politics of Rape' in Susan Griffin, *Made From This Earth: Selections from her Writing, 1967-1982* (London: The Women's Press, 1982)

Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)

Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape', in *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 134-140.



violence on which [...] the status of full protagonist rests'.<sup>41</sup> The way in which subsequent deployments of the rape-revenge structure have attempted to articulate and make sense of these discourses, and of feminist discourses in general, will be the subject of the following chapters.

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<sup>41</sup> Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 17.

## CHAPTER 4

### POPULAR FILM/POPULAR FEMINISM: THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE RAPE-REVENGE FILM

“The issues surrounding the film are feminist. But the film itself is not.” Thus argued Callie Khouri, writer of *Thelma and Louise*.<sup>1</sup> Despite Khouri’s claims, the critical reception of the film, nevertheless, centred quite explicitly on assessing the film’s status as a feminist text, therefore suggesting that it is not, in fact, possible to separate the textual (‘the film itself’) from the extra-textual (‘the issues surrounding the film’). Indeed, as Richard Dyer’s work on film stars illustrates, extra-textual material such as star personas, reviews and publicity material play an important part in the construction of any particular text’s meanings, particularly its dominant or preferred meanings.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, feminist analyses of mainstream texts have read ‘against the grain’ of these dominant or preferred meanings in order to produce resistant feminist readings. Here, however, I want to read ‘with the grain’ of these dominant meanings as they are inscribed in reviews of *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* in order to explore the ways in which they might produce popular, common-sense understandings of feminism. Of course, that both films were the subject of fierce controversy and debate would appear to militate against a reading of the reviews as constitutive of a set of dominant meanings. What I want to argue, however, is that the controversy both films engendered and which was played out in reviews of the films can be seen as symptomatic of the wider struggle over meanings which characterized the hegemonic project of the New Right during the 1980s and early 1990s. Within this context,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Lizzie Francke, ‘Interview with Callie Khouri’, *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979).

Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).

therefore, the dominant meanings the reviews produced were always, in a sense, negotiated. Thus, against accepted understandings of this period as one in which feminism was simply rejected or over (as evidenced by the prevalence of the terms ‘post-feminism’ and ‘backlash’), I will argue that feminism instead underwent a process of redefinition and negotiation, that this process was, in fact, a *part of* the wider hegemonic project of the New Right and that the meanings the reviews of *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* constructed were particularly illustrative of these processes.

### ***THE ACCUSED***

Whilst the controversy surrounding the release of *The Accused* in 1988 circulated around its depiction of perhaps the quintessential feminist issue, and while the language and ideas voiced in reviews were clearly borrowed from feminism, the debate about rape the film engendered was not explicitly cast in terms of feminism (only 6 of the 25 reviews I surveyed directly referred to feminism). Furthermore, although almost half the reviews referred to the controversy the film had engendered, they actually revealed a remarkable consensus and consistency in their assessments of the film, suggesting that what was at stake here was the production of a set of dominant or preferred meanings. What I want to explore, then, in my analysis of reviews of *The Accused* is the way in which the meanings of feminism they produced can be read as constituted by, and constitutive of, the wider hegemonic project of Thatcherism and Reaganism.

As I have already implied, the reviews clearly relied on and articulated feminist discourses of rape. However, these discourses were rarely explicitly identified as feminist or contextualized in terms of a broader feminist politics. Thus almost all the reviews in one form or another ‘quoted’ from the pioneering work on rape undertaken



by radical feminists such as Susan Griffin, Robin Morgan and Susan Brownmiller in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> This work, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, centred largely on attacking various 'rape myths' and on a definition of rape as about power or violence rather than sex. Thus Sean French's claim that, 'contrary to the myth peddled in films like "Straw Dogs"', *The Accused* represents rape as 'an act of deliberate violence and violation that no victim would ever ask for or enjoy' was paradigmatic of the way in which reviews of the film tended to reproduce almost verbatim these central tenets of feminist thinking on rape.<sup>4</sup> Virtually all the reviews, for example, commented on the way in which the film exploded the myth that victims of rape are 'asking for it' or that when a woman says no she really means yes. Thus, Sue Heal writing in *Today* suggested that the film was 'a powerful de-bunking of the adage that when a woman says No she usually means Maybe', claiming that the rape scene 'blasted out of the water any myths that [Sarah] got what she deserved'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* claimed that 'the argument of the movie is that although a young woman may act improperly [...] she should still have the right to say "no" and be heard'.<sup>6</sup> Some also commented on the way in which the film challenged the idea that men are simply unable to control their sexuality. As Margaret Walters argued in the *Listener*: 'The rapists clearly aren't driven by uncontrollable lust (that surprisingly insistent excuse for brutality) they're *angry*. Sarah's blatant sexiness is a challenge,

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Griffin, 'The Politics of Rape', in Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth: Selections from her Writing, 1967-1982* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), pp. 39-58.

Robin Morgan, 'Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape', in *Take Back The Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. by Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow, 1980), pp. 134-140.

Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Sean French, 'A Flirt with Danger', *Observer*, 19 February 1989, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Sue Heal, 'The Accused: Review', *Today*, 17 February 1989, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Ebert, 'The Accused: Review', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 October 1988.

which they can only extinguish by humiliating and hurting her.’<sup>7</sup> Finally, of the reviews that offered a definition of rape, half, like Walters, defined it as about power or violence rather than sex, whilst the other half categorized it as spectator sport committed by men for men. John Marriott of the *Daily Mail*, for example, argued that the film successfully conveyed ‘the essence of rape as an act of violence’,<sup>8</sup> whilst Roger Ebert went so far as to suggest that the film revealed even ‘verbal sexual harassment’ to be ‘a form of violence’.<sup>9</sup> Thelma Agnew, on the other hand, claimed that the film represented rape as ‘a macho exercise, a display by men for men’.<sup>10</sup>

What I want to argue, then, is that while the language of feminism is clearly in evidence in these reviews, it is a language that has been divorced from the politics from which it originated, not least because the language and ideas used here are rarely attributed to feminism or identified as specifically feminist. Moreover, despite the definition of rape as a matter of violence and power rather than sex, the reviews show little concern for the wider power relations that underpin and make rape possible. Thus while Suzanne Moore, in one of the few reviews to explicitly identify the film as feminist, claimed that *the film* ‘makes the smugness of the “post” in post-feminism look decidedly questionable, if not downright stupid’, *the reviews* of the film can actually be read as constructing an understanding of post-feminism, one that is rather different from that which Moore employs here.<sup>11</sup> In other words, while the way in which the reviews de-politicize feminism is suggestive of a departure from ‘traditional’ feminism and thus of *post*-feminism, their obvious *reliance* on feminism

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Walters, ‘Silent Witness’, *Listener*, CXXI: 3101 (16 February 1989), 32.

<sup>8</sup> John Marriott, ‘The Film That Puts Men in the Dock’, *Daily Mail*, 17 February 1989, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘*The Accused*: Review’, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 October 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Thelma Agnew, ‘*The Accused*: Review’, *Spare Rib*, 199 (March 1989), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Moore, ‘Asking for It?’, *New Statesman and Society*, 17 February 1989, pp. 16-17 (p. 16).

nevertheless counters Moore's understanding of the term post-feminism as implying that feminism is somehow 'over'. Indeed, the absence of debate about the film's status as a feminist text suggests not so much that feminism is no longer an issue (as we have seen it clearly was, even if it was not identified as such) or even, in the words of Janice Winship, 'that the feminist case has been won', but rather 'that it goes without saying that there is a case'.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, reviews of *The Accused* construct an understanding of post-feminism that refers not to a break with feminism, but to the way in which, as Winship suggests, the 'boundaries between feminists and non-feminists have become fuzzy'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, according to Winship, this is largely due to the way in which 'with the "success" of feminism some feminist ideas no longer have an oppositional charge but have become part of many people's, not just a minority's, common sense'.<sup>14</sup> As I hope to have shown, this understanding of post-feminism as a de-politicized and popularized version of feminism is very much in evidence in reviews of *The Accused*.

The absence of debate about the film's politics and the common-sense meanings it engendered may also be attributed to the film's perceived 'transparency'. In other words, almost all the reviews referred to the film's apparent 'realism', to its pertinence to 'real life'. Consequently the meanings of the film were understood as unmediated reflections of popular consciousness, rather than as specifically political constructions, and were thus presented as self-evident or common sense. This process is particularly apparent in Hilary Bonner's discussion of the film.<sup>15</sup> Opening her review

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<sup>12</sup> Janice Winship, "'A Girl Needs to Get Street-wise': Magazines for the 1980s', *Feminist Review*, 21 (1985), 25-46 (p. 37).

<sup>13</sup> Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> Hilary Bonner, 'Asking For It?: The Provocative Question Raised by Jodie Foster's New Movie', *Daily Mirror*, 10 February 1989, p. 13.



with the observation that opinions about the film 'are deeply divided', she continued by pointing out that 'some who see it say the girl was asking for trouble – and dismiss it as a feminist diatribe against men'.<sup>16</sup> Her next sentence (and, indeed, the rest of the review) suggests, however, that the film was simply realistic rather than specifically feminist: 'But Jodie Foster was so affected by merely acting the rape that she says: "I blacked out, just as if it was for real."'”<sup>17</sup> In many of the reviews, references to the film's realism simply took the form of noting that the film was inspired by a real incident or of a reference to the rape statistics quoted at the end of the film.

Elsewhere, realism was identified as a quality of the film itself. Iain Johnstone writing in the *Sunday Times*, for example, was amongst those who felt that the rape scene was 'vigorously real', whilst Nigel Andrews of the *Financial Times* and Adam Mars-Jones of the *Independent* both commented on the film's documentary style.<sup>18</sup> Others referred more generally to the film's 'uncompromising honesty',<sup>19</sup> 'undoubted sincerity',<sup>20</sup> or 'honest, low-key intensity'.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, Dorothy Wade suggested that the film was 'a fair and honest attempt to convey the grim reality of rape',<sup>22</sup> and Stephanie Calman claimed it to be 'a truthful film about violence against women'.<sup>23</sup> Critics also frequently referred to events in the lives of the film's stars in order to point up its realism. Kelly McGillis's much-publicized admission of her own rape six years earlier was most often cited in this respect, although John Hinckley's

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Iain Johnstone, 'The Accused: Review', *Sunday Times*, 4 December 1988, p. 10.

Nigel Andrews, 'Bearing the Rape Victim's Cross', *Financial Times*, 16 February 1989, p. 31.

Adam Mars-Jones, 'Unmoving Violation', *Independent*, 16 February 1989, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> Victoria Mather, 'Guilty Witnesses to a Violent Crime', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 1989, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Malcolm, 'The Lust Picture Show', *Guardian*, 16 February 1989, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Iain Johnstone, 'Doing Justice to the Victim', *Sunday Times*, 19 February 1989, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Wade, 'Why this Violence is Justified', *Sunday Times*, 12 February 1989, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Calman, 'Shocking Truth of How Men Turn Beast', *Sunday Express*, 19 February 1989, p. 18.

pathological obsession with Jodie Foster also became an issue. Perhaps the most interesting example of this process is the way in which the headline of the *Today* review – ‘This is My Revenge Against the Animals Who Raped Me’ – used McGillis’s rape to construct the film as a real-life rape-revenge story.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, this blurring of fiction and reality is likely to be as much a product of the film’s publicity machine as of the reviews themselves. Certainly, it is a line that was toed by the film’s stars. For example, as I pointed out above, Jodie Foster claimed in an interview that during the shooting of the rape scene ‘I blacked out, just as if it was for real’.<sup>25</sup> What I want to suggest is that this emphasis on the film’s realism, on its apparently transparent and unproblematic reflection of social reality, functioned to preclude the need for further questioning of (the representation of) that reality or the politics it articulated. This, in turn, worked to support the preferred meanings which the film’s publicity put into circulation, meanings which, as I hope to show, actually had little to do with feminism (but which can perhaps be seen as a product of the way in which feminist characterizations of rape as a symbolic expression of power have tended to open it up to metaphorical appropriations). References to John Hinckley, for example, functioned to equate the rape of Jodie Foster in the film with Hinckley’s assassination attempt on President Reagan seven years earlier. This had the effect of constructing rape not simply as a crime against women, but as part of a wider threat to the social and political order.

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Willows, ‘This is My Revenge Against the Animals Who Raped Me’, *Today*, 21 October 1988, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Hilary Bonner, ‘Asking For It?: The Provocative Question Raised by Jodie Foster’s New Movie’, *Daily Mirror*, 10 February 1989, p. 13.

The film's production notes and video jacket are illustrative of these processes.<sup>26</sup>

The video's front cover, for example, reproduces the film's publicity poster and features close-ups of Foster's and McGillis's faces shot in grainy black and white, a traditional signifier of realism (see figure 6, p. 137). The text on the back cover, however, quite clearly demonstrates that the 'real' issues that the film will deal with are not concerned with feminism or even rape. Instead it asks:

What are the limits of justice? Of social responsibility? The Accused takes a powerful and thought-provoking look at human nature and individual moral conscience, and a judicial process that treats the victim like a criminal.

Jodie Foster gives a critically-acclaimed performance as the hard-living, fiercely independent Sarah Tobias, who is gang raped in the back of a neighbourhood bar. But that is only the beginning of her ordeal. Now Sarah finds herself battling the legal system, not once but twice, as she and her attorney (Kelly McGillis) go after both her attackers and the onlookers whose cheering fuelled and encouraged the assault.

Similarly, the film's production notes ask: 'What is the responsibility of someone who witnesses a violent crime?'

Sarah Tobias is assaulted and nobody helps her. When she cries for justice, nobody hears her. Except one lawyer. Together, Sarah and

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<sup>26</sup> Clearly, *The Accused's* press book would be a better indicator of the preferred meanings the film's publicity machine attempted to put into circulation. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, there was no copy of the press book available in this country.





Figure 6: Video box cover for *The Accused*



Assistant District Attorney Katheryn Murphy bring to trial the people as dangerous as the men who committed the crime – the witnesses who let it happen.<sup>27</sup>

This is clearly not the language of feminism. Rather it is the language of popular morality which emerged in both Britain and America during the Thatcher and Reagan administrations of the 1980s and which was part of the broader political agenda of the New Right. As Elizabeth Traube observes, this agenda involved ‘shaping a style of right-wing populism designed to appeal to popular resentment of bureaucratic authority’.<sup>28</sup> This resentment was channelled, in particular, into a critique of liberal institutions such as the criminal justice system which, as Jane Feuer points out, was seen as placing ‘the rights of criminals above the rights of victims’.<sup>29</sup> This critique was, moreover, part of wider attacks on the liberalism and permissiveness of the 1960s and 1970s, attacks which functioned to invoke fears of moral breakdown, of crime and delinquency, in order to assert the need for individual morality and responsibility. Stuart Hall’s work on Thatcherism provides a succinct summary of these processes:

The ‘cry from below’ for the restoration of moral regulation took, first, the immediate symptoms of disturbance – rising crime, delinquency, moral permissiveness – and constructed them, with the help of organized grassroots ideological forces, into the scenario of a general ‘crisis of the moral order’. In the later phases, these were connotatively linked with the

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<sup>27</sup> Paramount Pictures Corporation, ‘Production Information for *The Accused*’ (1988), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 27.

more politicized threats, to compose a picture of a social order on the brink of moral collapse, its enemies proliferating 'within and without'. This is 'the crisis' experienced at the popular level in the universal, depoliticized, experiential language of popular morality.<sup>30</sup>

This language was, thus, also the language of traditional common sense which, according to Hall, is 'a massively conservative force, penetrated thoroughly [...] by religious notions of good and evil, by fixed conceptions of the unchanging and unchangeable character of human nature, and by ideas of retributive justice'.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, these are also the themes that *The Accused's* publicity material promoted.

What I want to argue, then, is that in taking up the preferred meanings suggested by the film's publicity, reviews of *The Accused*, frequently worked to construct the representation of rape in the film not as a specifically feminist issue, or even as an issue about gender, but as a matter of popular morality, of depoliticized common sense. Indeed, this is hardly surprising, given the ease with which the issues feminist discourses of rape have put into circulation, and which the reviews took up, can slide into questions of morality and responsibility (is the victim 'asking for it'?; do men have a responsibility to control their sexuality?). This process became particularly apparent in Dorothy Wade's review of the film which, despite being unusual in that it devoted a significant amount of space to the views of a feminist social worker, ultimately downplayed the specificity of rape and its significance in terms of feminism. Discussing our tendency to turn a blind eye to crime, she claimed that 'the best thing

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<sup>30</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 137.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 142.



about *The Accused* is the spotlight it turns on these passive roles that any of us may play. When we hear screams in the street at night and decide to do nothing, how much responsibility do we bear if a crime, *perhaps a rape*, is committed?’<sup>32</sup> Adam Mars-Jones made a similar point, arguing that the film was ‘only secondarily about rape’, the real issue being ‘the extent of a citizen’s responsibility’.<sup>33</sup> These understandings of the film’s representation of rape clearly echo those put into circulation by the film’s publicity. The production notes, for example, repeatedly describe Sarah’s ordeal not as a rape but as an ‘assault’ or a ‘violent crime’.<sup>34</sup> Thus the film is constructed as dealing with moral, rather than specifically feminist issues, as the film’s screenwriter, Tom Topor, observes in the production notes: ‘The moral questions that this film raises could have been achieved by a different violent crime, a suicide or robbery.’<sup>35</sup> These sentiments were reproduced almost verbatim in Tom Hutchinson’s review, which also glossed over the gender politics specific to rape, identifying it instead as ‘a *moral* concern’ and claiming that the film ‘touches a disturbing nerve in *both men and women* – that of a common humanity. Or lack of it’.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Stephanie Calman credited the film with reopening ‘the debate about society’s collective responsibility for crime’,<sup>37</sup> and Victoria Mather of the *Daily Telegraph* proposed that the film was an indictment of a society ‘that is all too guilty of not “getting involved”’.<sup>38</sup> The emphasis of American reviews was similar. Rita Kempley of the *Washington Post*, for

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<sup>32</sup> Dorothy Wade, ‘Why this Violence is Justified’, *Sunday Times*, 12 February 1989, p. 5 (my emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, ‘Unmoving Violation’, *Independent*, 16 February 1989, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Paramount Pictures Corporation, ‘Production Information for *The Accused*’ (1988).

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Hutchinson, ‘How One Girl’s Ordeal Put Humanity on Trial’, *Mail on Sunday*, 19 February 1989, p. 36 (my emphasis).

<sup>37</sup> Stephanie Calman, ‘Shocking Truth of How Men Turn Beast’, *Sunday Express*, 19 February 1989, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Mather, ‘Guilty Witnesses to a Violent Crime’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 1989, p. 18.

example, argued that ‘Sarah’s lack of good sense isn’t on trial here, nor for that matter is male aggression. “The Accused” addresses the accountability of the bystander’,<sup>39</sup> while Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* claimed that the responsibility of bystanders in a rape case ‘may be the most important message this movie has to offer’.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Ebert even went so far as to suggest that Sarah too must ‘start taking responsibility for herself’.<sup>41</sup> Thus the reviews can be read as effecting a kind of ideological slippage whereby a feminist politics of rape is transformed into a Reaganite politics of individual morality and responsibility. As I hope to show in chapters 6 and 7, this slippage between feminism and the politics of the New Right is paradigmatic of articulations of the rape-revenge structure in the late 1980s and 1990s.

That the reviews constructed a discursive context understandable in terms of right-wing populism rather than feminism is further evidenced in the way in which they tended to downplay both the relationship and class differences between Sarah and Katheryn, thus emphasizing a Reaganite ideology of individualism and antielitism over the collective politics of feminism. Very few reviews, for example, referred to the different class backgrounds of the two female leads (the most decisive comment appeared, unsurprisingly, in *Marxism Today*), whilst those reviews that referred to the relationship between the two women tended to downplay any suggestions of solidarity between them.<sup>42</sup> Thus Suzanne Moore argued that the film ‘refuses the easy option of setting up a false sisterhood’ between Katheryn and Sarah,<sup>43</sup> Stephanie Calman

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<sup>39</sup> Rita Kempley, ‘*The Accused*: Review’, *Washington Post*, 14 October 1988.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Ebert, ‘*The Accused*: Review’, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 October 1988.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Beatrix Campbell, ‘*The Accused* On Release’, *Marxism Today*, March 1989, pp. 42–43.

<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Moore, ‘Asking for It?’, *New Statesman and Society*, 17 February 1989, pp. 16–17 (p. 17).

claimed that their relationship is not 'sentimentalized',<sup>44</sup> and Beatrix Campbell suggested that the film illustrated 'the difficulty of solidarity'.<sup>45</sup> What I think the representation of Katheryn and Sarah and their relationship does articulate, however, is the dialogue between popular understandings of the 1960s and the 1980s, between popular conceptions of collective political movements such as feminism and the politics of Reaganism. Sarah, for example, is clearly constructed as representative of the 1960s. In other words, she is represented as an independent, sexually liberated 'hippy' who smokes marijuana, has crystals in her car, practices astrology and lives in a trailer park. Katheryn, on the other hand, is represented as the power-dressing, yuppie career woman who became emblematic of the 1980s. Not only was this dialogue taken up and played out in more general terms in reviews of the film, it was, as David Glover and Cora Kaplan have pointed out in their discussion of 1980s male crime fiction, 'part of a general struggle in the eighties as to what should constitute the public memory of popular politics'.<sup>46</sup> As Glover and Kaplan go on to argue

Though searching for an objective truth about this past against which to measure present deformations is no longer a viable political or theoretical project, thinking politically and historically about the many versions of it now in circulation certainly is.<sup>47</sup>

In the following section I want to use an analysis of reviews of *Thelma and Louise* to illuminate and expand on this argument.

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<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Calman, 'Shocking Truth of How Men Turn Beast', *Sunday Express*, 19 February 1989, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> Beatrix Campbell, 'The Accused On Release', *Marxism Today*, March 1989, pp. 42-43 (p. 43).

<sup>46</sup> David Glover and Cora Kaplan, 'Guns in the House of Culture?: Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 213-226 (p. 216).



### **THELMA AND LOUISE**

While Katheryn and Sarah's relationship in *The Accused* was seen as representing 'the difficulty of solidarity', there was no such equivocation about the relationship between the two female protagonists in *Thelma and Louise* – the film was almost universally categorized as a female buddy movie. Thus, unlike the controversy surrounding *The Accused*, the debates which circulated around *Thelma and Louise* tended to gloss over the film's representation of rape in favour of an emphasis on the women's relationship and their revenge. Moreover, the reviews explicitly set out to address the question of the extent to which this depiction of female violence and 'sisterhood' could be seen as an articulation of a feminist politics. The question was, nevertheless, a contentious one. As Sharon Willis observes:

Within this framework, objections emerging from feminist and anti-feminist quarters took several forms. A range of critics took issue with the film's depiction of men. In a rhetoric clearly borrowed from feminism, but crudely reduced, they found the film guilty of male-bashing.<sup>48</sup>

The question of the film's status as a feminist text thus tended to be posed in one of two ways, either in terms of popular conceptions of feminism, as in Charles Bremner's 'Is *Thelma and Louise* a male-bashing movie?'<sup>49</sup> or in terms of popular conceptions of film, as in Joan Smith's 'Can *Thelma and Louise* be billed a feminist tub-thump, the most right-on of road movies, or is it merely a masculine revenge fantasy whose

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Willis, 'Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 120-128 (p. 120).

<sup>49</sup> Charles Bremner, 'Giving as Bad as they Get', *Times* (Saturday Review), 20 June 1991, p. 6.

buddies happen to be female.’<sup>50</sup> The latter question, then, was not posed in terms of feminism *per se*, but in filmic terms. In other words, what was at stake here was the extent to which male-defined paradigms of film making such as the road movie or buddy film were successfully appropriated for feminism.

Those that found the film not to be feminist tended to take the latter approach, appearing more interested in the filmic rather than social context of the film. Particularly indicative of this type of review was the way in which many of the critics took a distinctly *auteurist* approach to the film, commenting not only on Scott’s visual style but placing *Thelma and Louise* in the context of the rest of Scott’s *oeuvre*. More significantly, however, they also assessed the film against an implied but never defined conception of what constitutes a political or feminist film, namely seriousness and realism combined with a rejection of the generic, structural and commercial constraints of Hollywood. Thus the film was frequently criticized for merely ‘copying male ways of doing things’, for failing to depart from patriarchal paradigms, both in terms of the women’s behaviour and particularly in terms of the film’s use of Hollywood genre conventions.<sup>51</sup> For such critics, then, the film was a straight copy of the male road/buddy movie which ‘simply spruces up a well-worn genre, placing repressed females where you expect macho males’,<sup>52</sup> and in which ‘it is doubtful whether they play any roles that haven’t been explored by men in buddy pictures’.<sup>53</sup> What appeared to be at stake in such responses to the film was a conception of feminism as about difference rather than sameness, both in terms of male and female

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<sup>50</sup> Joan Smith, ‘Road Testing’, *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Shaun Usher, ‘Men Get the Bullet from Tough Girls’, *Daily Mail*, 12 July 1991, p. 30.

<sup>52</sup> Geoff Brown, ‘Bosom Buddies Take to the Road’, *Times*, 11 July 1991. Iain Johnstone makes an almost identical criticism in ‘Buddy Can You Spare a Dame?’, *Sunday Times*, 14 July 1991.

<sup>53</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, ‘Getting Away from It All’, *Independent*, 12 July 1991, p. 18.

behaviour and the representation of that behaviour and in terms of film making itself. Thus those that found the film not to be feminist, such as the *Guardian's* Joan Smith, argued that neither violence nor revenge films were the preserve of females or feminism and that the film was 'little more than a masculine revenge fantasy in which the gender of the leading characters has been switched'.<sup>54</sup>

Yet a favourite criticism of *Thelma and Louise* was also to liken it to what is perhaps one of the most 'feminine' of genres, the fairy-tale. Adam Mars-Jones of the *Independent* claimed that 'this is fairytale territory, with a little social comment thrown in, and the logic is not strong',<sup>55</sup> and Iain Johnstone of the *Sunday Times* suggested that 'it's about as newsworthy as Goldilocks and slightly more so than Peter Pan'.<sup>56</sup> Thus whilst the film's similarities with the road/buddy movie suggested that the film was too 'masculine' to be taken seriously as a feminist statement, the comparison with fairy-tales and their perceived lack of logic or social importance suggested, somewhat contradictorily, that the film was also too 'feminine' to be feminist. Furthermore, fairy-tales were invoked to suggest that the film was not feminist because it did not deal with real, everyday life. As Lynda Hart points out: 'The *Time* cover story sought out feminist scholars to reassure readers that the film was "not ... a cultural representation but ... a fairy tale"'.<sup>57</sup> This issue of the film's lack of verisimilitude was also taken up by several British critics. While Joan Smith of the *Guardian* argued fairly generally that 'the dilemmas faced by the women in the film have [...] little to do with real life',<sup>58</sup> many critics took particular exception to

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<sup>54</sup> Joan Smith, 'Road Testing', *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, 'Getting Away from It All', *Independent*, 12 July 1991, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Iain Johnstone, 'Buddy Can You Spare a Dame?', *Sunday Times*, 14 July 1991.

<sup>57</sup> Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Joan Smith, 'Road Testing', *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.



what they saw as Thelma's irrational and unrealistic behaviour in consenting to sleep with a perfect stranger such as J.D. so soon after having been brutally sexually assaulted.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, in an attempt to circumvent the label 'feminist', *Thelma and Louise* was categorized both as a straightforward copy of the male road/buddy movie and as an unrealistic fairy-tale. However, it was also argued that the film could not be taken seriously as a feminist statement because it was simply a *comedy*. For Adam Mars-Jones, then, the film was merely a 'genial, slightly over-extended comedy' that was 'very far from hard-line',<sup>60</sup> and for Shaun Usher of the *Daily Mail* it was 'too commercial, not to mention funny and exciting, for a mere sermon'.<sup>61</sup> The suggestion here, therefore, is that for the film to be taken as a genuine piece of feminist political film making it would not only have to be serious, it would also have to be 'hard-line' or a 'sermon', in other words, didactic.

Whilst those that argued that the film was not feminist because it was no different from male paradigms, those that *did* take the film's feminism seriously responded by arguing that the film was feminist precisely because it *was* different. In other words, arguing that the film turned the conventions of the male buddy movie 'neatly on their head',<sup>62</sup> such critics claimed that this was more than a simple inversion of roles since the variations were made very clear. For example, Hugo Davenport argued that 'the contrast with the competitive psychology of male friendship in buddie-movies is neatly

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example:

Nigella Lawson, 'Furore Triggered by Women on the Loose', *Sunday Times*, 7 July 1991.

Alexander Walker, 'A Letter from Thelma's Hide-Out', *Evening Standard*, 11 July 1991, p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, 'Getting Away from It All', *Independent*, 12 July 1991, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Shaun Usher, 'Men Get the Bullet from Tough Girls', *Daily Mail*, 12 July 1991, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Mick Brown, 'Revenge of the Abused 'Accessories'', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 1991, p. 15.

pointed up when, halfway through, Louise weakens and Thelma grows stronger',<sup>63</sup> whilst Charles Bremner suggested that Thelma and Louise are different because they 'operate by female logic, independent of men'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, against those that claimed the film was not feminist because it was unrealistic and/or failed to deal with the problems faced by women in the real world, such reviews argued that, despite the sensational aspects of the film's depiction of violence, it dealt with 'real, everyday sexual politics'.<sup>65</sup> For example, Mick Brown pointed out that Thelma and Louise's violence serves to exact revenge 'on behalf of womankind for years of sexual harassment',<sup>66</sup> whilst Manohla Dargis argued that the film's depiction of male violence was not simplified but 'pointedly woven right into the fabric of everyday life in the form of crummy jobs, oppressive marriages, injurious laws, and ubiquitous police'.<sup>67</sup>

Thus those that found the film to be feminist also often referred to its impact on the extra-diegetic world. For example, it was frequently pointed out that the film's reversal of gender roles functioned to consign men 'to the parts that Hollywood usually leaves for women',<sup>68</sup> while the male stereotyping answered the way in which 'women are routinely stereotyped in films every week of the year'.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Mick Brown in the *Daily Telegraph* argued that 'it is a tribute to the skill of *Thelma and Louise* that it should have provoked so much debate while remaining so funny, charming and utterly devoid of any heavy-handed polemic',<sup>70</sup> whilst Hugo Davenport, also in the *Telegraph*, claimed that 'the film is exciting, emotional, funny, beautifully

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<sup>63</sup> Hugo Davenport, 'Taking to the Refuge of the Road', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1991, p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> Charles Bremner, 'Giving as Bad as they Get', *Times* (Saturday Review), 20 June 1991, p. 6.

<sup>65</sup> Hugo Davenport, 'Taking to the Refuge of the Road', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1991, p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Mick Brown, 'Revenge of the Abused "Accessories"', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 1991, p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Guns N' Poses', *Village Voice*, 16 July 1991, p. 22.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Bremner, 'Giving as Bad as they Get', *Times* (Saturday Review), 20 June 1991, p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Hugo Davenport, 'Taking to the Refuge of the Road', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1991, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> Mick Brown, 'Revenge of the Abused "Accessories"', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 July 1991, p. 15.

acted, even liberating, and it never allows the drag factor of feminist dogma to slow it down'.<sup>71</sup> These latter comments, however, while suggesting that the film articulated a form of 'popular' feminism, shared with reviews that found the film not to be feminist, the assumption that 'traditional' feminism was didactic, dogmatic and polemical.

Thus, despite the debate over the *Thelma and Louise*'s status as a feminist text, the conceptions of feminism on which this debate rested proved to be remarkably similar.

For example, both sides of the debate constructed a version of feminism which emphasized 'women's essential difference from men'.<sup>72</sup> They also relied on an understanding of feminist culture as that which resists 'the male-stream definitions of art and culture'.<sup>73</sup> Both, moreover, saw feminism as focusing on 'the reality of women's experiences'<sup>74</sup> and on 'material instances of women's subordination' rather than on theoretical issues.<sup>75</sup> Finally, they frequently constructed feminists as 'extremist',<sup>76</sup> or as 'terrorists, trading in dogma',<sup>77</sup> who saw men as 'the enemy'.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, whilst *Thelma and Louise* itself may not articulate any identifiable branch of academic/theoretical or movement/political feminism, the critical responses to the film, whether they found it feminist or not, appeared to rely for their assessments on the language of the radical feminism of the early 1970s. All the quotes cited above, for example, are taken from discussions of radical feminism. It is not insignificant that

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<sup>71</sup> Hugo Davenport, 'Taking to the Refuge of the Road', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1991, p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 67.

<sup>73</sup> Robin Rowland and Renate D. Klein, 'Radical Feminism: Critique and Construct', in *A Reader in Feminist Knowledge*, ed. by Sneja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 271-303 (p. 296).

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>75</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>78</sup> Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 'Political Lesbianism: The Case Against Heterosexuality', in *The Woman Question: Readings on the Subordination of Women*, ed. by Mary Evans (London: Fontana, 1982), pp. 63-72 (p. 65).



since this branch of feminism eschewed theoretical interventions in favour of direct action and campaigning that it was most ripe for 'bastardization' and popularization, therefore becoming part of the discourse of everyday life. As Imelda Whelehan points out: 'Most people if asked to define feminism today would produce a definition which vaguely resembles the radical feminist agenda.'<sup>79</sup>

In relying on a definition of feminism which 'vaguely resembles the radical feminist agenda', the press were able to align what they perceived to be the film's 'male bashing' with feminism, whilst simultaneously denouncing it for being too extreme or for not being extreme enough. *Thelma and Louise* was thus widely criticized for its perceived 'male-bashing'. Joan Smith of the *Guardian*, for example, invoked a comparison between the film and Valerie Solanis's SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Manifesto,<sup>80</sup> whilst John Leo's now infamous *US News and World Report* review suggested that the film's anti-male bias constituted a fascist form of feminism.<sup>81</sup> When, however, such man-hating was seen to be compromised by the women's heterosexuality or the inclusion of 'nice' men, the film's feminism was also considered to be compromised. Thus 'Daws' in *Variety* argued that the film is not about 'women vs. men' (i.e. feminism) because the women 'can't seem to stay away from men'.<sup>82</sup> In another register, however, a popular version of radical feminism was invoked to *support* the film's status as a feminist text. For example, Manohla Dargis interpreted *Thelma and Louise*'s trajectory through the narrative as a consciousness-raising experience that leads them to a brief lesbian encounter (their final kiss), female

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<sup>79</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 86.

<sup>80</sup> Joan Smith, 'Road Testing', *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.

<sup>81</sup> See Charles Bremner, 'Giving as Bad as they Get', *Times* (Saturday Review), 20 June 1991, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> 'Daws', 'Thelma and Louise: Review', *Variety*, 13 May 1991.

See also: Adam Mars-Jones, 'Getting Away from It All', *Independent*, 12 July 1991, p. 18.

solidarity (their clasped hands) and separatism (their drive into the abyss).<sup>83</sup>

Somewhat contradictorily, then, in reviews of *Thelma and Louise* a popular version of 70s feminism was invoked both to assert *and* deny the film's status as a feminist text.

What I want to propose is that this simultaneous assertion and denial of the film's 'feminism', combined with the way which individual reviews frequently both depended on, and disavowed, the tenets of 70s feminism, suggests that what was at stake here was not an authentic feminist politics, but a negotiated version of 70s feminism in which sisterhood and heterosexuality, angry women and nice men could coexist. Indeed, that the film relies on, and constructs, a *popular version* of feminism is actually implicit in Dargis' claim that 'Thelma and Louise have *reinvented* sisterhood for the *American screen*'.<sup>84</sup> What is more interesting, however, is the way in which, in her *Village Voice* review of the film, she situates the production of this popular version of feminism within the specific historical and political context of the 1980s. Here, Dargis asks:

What kind of feminism are we talking about anyway? *The Second Sex*?

bell hooks? Andrea Dworkin? Susie Bright? Granted, *Thelma and Louise*

sells a kind of feminism *brut*, inarticulate and inchoate. Yet after more

than 10 years of Reagan, Bush, and the murky chimera of post-feminism

how many can still speak the language of liberation with any assurance?

[...] If feminism is ever to be more than a historical artifact or lost utopia,

it not only has to be reclaimed, it must be reinvented.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Thelma and Louise and the Tradition of the Male Road Movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp. 86-92.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 92 (my emphasis).

<sup>85</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'Guns N' Poses', *Village Voice*, 16 July 1991, p. 22.

These are, of course, rhetorical questions, to which, therefore, it is assumed we already know the answers. Thus, Dargis' argument reproduces the standard feminist understanding of the 1980s and the politics of the New Right as inaugurating a backlash against feminism, and of post-feminism as a period in which feminism is somehow over. The reinvention of feminism we find in films such as *Thelma and Louise* is consequently understood as representing a *response to* this backlash against feminism and as a way of countering 'the murky chimera of post-feminism'.<sup>86</sup> Against these accepted understandings of the relationship between feminism and the New Right as essentially antagonistic and mutually exclusive, I want to argue that the popular redefinition or negotiation of feminism we find in films such as *Thelma and Louise* and *The Accused* and in the discourses surrounding them, was, in fact, a *part of* the wider hegemonic project of the New Right and that it is in this context that the term post-feminism is best understood.

As I hope to have shown, for example, reviews of *The Accused* simultaneously invoke *and* suppress feminism. They invoke a common-sense, popular feminism and suppress a collective, political feminism. The reviews can thus be read as part of the struggle which took place in the 1980s to (re)define and appropriate the popular meanings of the politics of the 1960s and 70s. As David Glover and Cora Kaplan have argued:

Today the fate of the sixties-within-the-eighties is a notoriously important issue in the struggle for cultural and political meaning [...]. The hegemony of the New Right has involved a sustained attempt to monopolize the

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<sup>86</sup> Suzanne Moore, for example, produces a similar reading of *The Accused*. See pp. 132-133 above.



complex terrain of the popular, and in particular to drastically overhaul the social significance of the sixties.<sup>87</sup>

The production of common-sense meanings is a vital aspect of this project. According to Gramsci, common sense 'holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of the will'.<sup>88</sup> Thus, as Stuart Hall has observed: 'To a significant extent, Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense: its aim is to become the "common sense of the age"'.<sup>89</sup> It is, moreover, within the field of popular culture that the representation of common sense, of the taken-for-granted, finds its clearest articulation. Reviews of *The Accused* and the meanings of feminism they construct must therefore be understood within the context of the hegemonic project of Thatcherism and Reaganism. In other words, they view feminist discourses of rape through the lens of the individual populism of the Reagan era and, in so doing, construct a depoliticized, individualized, popular feminism which is then situated as part of a broader, hegemonic common sense.

Tania Modleski has defined post-feminism as the appropriation of feminist ideas for non-feminist ends and this definition would certainly seem to be applicable to my analysis of the way in which reviews of *The Accused* articulate feminist discourses.<sup>90</sup> Implicit in this definition, however, is the assumption that these discourses then simply become anti-feminist. In other words, post-feminism is understood in terms of the

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<sup>87</sup> David Glover and Cora Kaplan, 'Guns in the House of Culture?: Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 213-226 (p. 222).

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (London: Routledge, 1991).

backlash against feminism which, it has been argued, began to emerge in the late 1980s. While the belief that the 1980s and the 'patriarchal' politics of Thatcher and Reagan helped inaugurate such a backlash is widespread, I think this not only represents a somewhat simplistic cause and effect approach to the relationship between post-feminism and Thatcherism/Reaganism, it also fails to acknowledge the way in which the meanings which circulate around these concepts are rarely fixed, unitary and without contradictions. In some anti-Thatcher discourses, for example, Thatcher became the *object* rather than the originator of a backlash against feminism. In other words, she was constructed as a *product* of feminism and thus of the danger of giving women too much power. As Jane Feuer has argued:

The eighties are emerging more and more as an incredibly hegemonic period; and yet we are also more and more able to sense contradictions that were played out in the culture. [...] It is the contradictions that enable us to see what Stuart Hall and others mean when they characterize "hegemony" as a struggle over meanings, a process that is always ongoing even when (as during the mid-eighties) it seems as if one side has won a decisive victory. This is why it is important to look at the meanings under discussion as always being contested.<sup>91</sup>

In other words, although ideas about post-feminism have been produced and constructed within the context of Reaganism and Thatcherism and thus must be understood within this context, this does not mean that they simply reflect these ideologies. What, for example, does it mean when post-feminist icons such as The

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<sup>91</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 16.

Spice Girls declare Margaret Thatcher as their heroine or when writer Natasha Walter claims Thatcher as the heroine of the 'new feminism' described in her recent book of that name?<sup>92</sup> Does it mean that post-feminism or new feminism simply endorse or reflect the intricacies of Thatcher's politics or policies? Or does it mean that ideas about post-feminism and new feminism have been formed in the wake of *popular* understandings and representations of Thatcher and Thatcherism, understandings that have to do with individual female power and strength, the coupling of feminism with femininity ('The Iron Lady'/'Girl Power'), populism and the break with traditional ideologies that occurred under the New Right. These questions were, in fact, recently the subject of a fierce debate raging around Natasha Walter's book, *The New Feminism*. In a discussion between Walter and Hilary Cottam over whether Thatcher is indeed a heroine of the new feminism, Cottam retorts to Walter:

In embracing Margaret Thatcher you, like her, have merely substituted the individual for politics. You want to separate the personal from the political, but are we not then left with just an empty form of celebrity feminism facing a political vacuum?<sup>93</sup>

According to Jennifer Wicke, however:

Things look different [...] if the celebrity sphere is not immediately vilified as a realm of ideological ruin or relegated to aberrant or merely "popular" practices. Rather, we must recognize that the energies of the celebrity

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<sup>92</sup> Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Little Brown, 1998), p. 175.

<sup>93</sup> Hilary Cottam, 'Blessed Margaret', *Guardian* (The Week), 17 January 1998, p. 4.



imaginary are fueling feminist discourse and political activity as never before.<sup>94</sup>

The debate over Thatcher's status as a feminist icon is, of course, a case in point. As Cottam concludes her case against Walter 'we must agree to differ and I will celebrate that you have opened this space because there is so much more to be done'.<sup>95</sup> Far from suggesting that feminism is somehow 'over' or 'past', the struggle over the meanings of feminism apparent both here and in the debates surrounding *The Accused* and *Thelma and Louise* suggests, as Janice Winship has observed, that 'feminism no longer has a simple coherence around a set of easily defined principles [...] but instead is a much richer, more diverse and contradictory mix than it ever was in the 1970s'.<sup>96</sup> As I hope to have shown, this is partly due to the way in which, as Julia Hallam points out in her survey of reviews of *Working Girl*, 'feminism as a (contradictory and unfixed) subject position is widely circulating as an interpretative strategy amongst [...] journalists'.<sup>97</sup> However, I think it is also to do with the way in which those interpretative strategies have intersected in complex and unexpected ways with the hegemonic project and popular construction of Thatcherism and Reaganism. Suzanne Moore's feminist appropriation of the Katherine Parker character in *Working Girl*, for example, could equally be referring to popular constructions of Margaret Thatcher: 'My sympathies were with Katherine – so completely set up as a male fantasy of a ball-breaking career bitch – that it's hard not

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<sup>94</sup> Jennifer Wicke, 'Celebrity Material: Materialist Feminism and the Culture of Celebrity', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 93:4 (Fall 1994), 751-778 (p. 758).

<sup>95</sup> Hilary Cottam, 'Blessed Margaret', *Guardian* (The Week), 17 January 1998, p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 149.

<sup>97</sup> Julia Hallam, 'Working Girl: A Woman's Film for the Eighties', in *Gendering the Reader*, ed. by Sara Mills (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1994), pp. 173-198 (p. 190).

to fall in love with her.’<sup>98</sup> To view the late 1980s and 1990s as simply a period of backlash against feminism or as a period in which feminism is over is thus to fail to address or understand the complicated and often contradictory ways in which the popular, the political and the critical intersect.

As the controversy surrounding *Thelma and Louise* shows us, for example, a film’s politics exists as much in the discourses surrounding it and its impact on the social world as in the formal and thematic content of the text itself. Thus against Callie Khouri’s insistence that ‘The issues surrounding the film are feminist. But the film itself is not’, I hope to have shown that ‘the issues surrounding the film’ cannot, in fact, be separated from the ‘film itself’.<sup>99</sup> Eleanor J. Bader’s *Spare Rib* review of *Thelma and Louise* is revealing in this respect, since her argument that the film’s status as a feminist text was ‘problematic’ because it relied on stereotypes of ‘feminists (they all hate men and wish them dead)’ seemed to be hopelessly entangled in discourses outside of the film.<sup>100</sup> In other words, it can never be entirely clear whether the equation of feminism and male-bashing is a product of the film itself or of the critical and media discourses surrounding the film. The controversy thus also demonstrates the way in which feminism is always discursively constructed, is never available in some pure or unmediated form. Therefore, both the reviews that attempted to read the film as an articulation of some authentic feminism, and those that attempted to detach the film from its discursive context and shift attention to the film as film, missed the point that neither film nor feminism exists in a vacuum. Consequently their attempts to conclusively evaluate the feminism of the film against

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<sup>98</sup> Cited in Julia Hallam, ‘*Working Girl*: A Woman’s Film for the Eighties’, in *Gendering the Reader*, ed. by Sara Mills (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1994), pp. 173-198 (p. 189).

<sup>99</sup> Lizzie Francke, ‘Interview with Callie Khouri’, *Guardian*, 9 July 1991, p. 17.

<sup>100</sup> Eleanor J. Bader, ‘*Thelma and Louise*: Review’, *Spare Rib*, July 1991, pp. 19-20 (p. 20).

some fixed, authentic notion of either feminism or political film making were doomed to failure. Rather, as the reviews themselves illustrate, film is one of the sites on, through and against which the meanings of feminism are *produced*. In order to fully understand these meanings and the way in which they are produced, we need to read films historically through the discourses surrounding them and to explore the complex ways in which such discourses intersect and negotiate with each other.



## CHAPTER 5

### FRONTIER FEMMES: RAPE-REVENGE AND THE WESTERN

Although rape may be the act around which the plot sometimes pivots, Westerns don't examine the experience, or the consequences except in one respect: rape is the occasion for the outraged to seek revenge.<sup>1</sup>

Not only are rape and revenge standard motifs in the western, they are intimately connected. In the traditional western, however, the outraged who seek revenge for rape are typically the husbands or fiancés of the victim rather than the raped women herself.<sup>2</sup> Thus, as Janet Thumin has observed 'stories of the west' are traditionally 'stories of the masculine'.<sup>3</sup> What I want to argue here, however, is that the rise of second-wave feminism in the early 1970s, and the concomitant emergence of specifically *female*-centred deployments of the rape-revenge structure, resulted in a movement of women from the margins of the western's symbolic world to its frontier. The western myth thus became one of the arenas in which the changing relationship between men and women could be articulated and made sense of, in which stories of the west could become stories of feminism and femininity. Indeed, the western myth's ability to transcend its roots in history perhaps make it the ultimate 'narrative of transformation'. For example, in his seminal study of the western, Will Wright attempts to demonstrate how changes in the western's plot structure relate to

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952), *The Bravados* (Henry King, 1958) and *Last Train from Gun Hill* (John Sturges, 1959).

<sup>3</sup> Janet Thumin, "'Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter': Masculinity and In/competence in *Unforgiven*", in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, ed. by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), pp. 234-248 (p. 242).

changing conceptions of contemporary society, particularly the transition from a market economy to a corporate economy.<sup>4</sup> As Wright argues:

Except as a setting, the Western myth is not concerned with the actual events and people of the West; rather it uses the western setting to code *kinds* of people in fundamental relationships that exist and are problematic in modern life.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, with specific reference to gender, Pam Cook has observed:

The frontier has often been seen in symbolic terms as a boundary or barrier between opposing ideas [...]. This formulation has both a relationship to actual events (the breaking down of the barrier between East and West under pressure from eastern expansion), and also a link with psychic and social reality (the loss of boundaries of sexual difference, as eastern 'feminine' values came into contact with the 'masculine' Wild West). Not surprisingly, then, many Westerns work away at the problem of re-establishing sexual boundaries: it's unusual for the woman who starts out wearing pants, carrying a gun and riding a horse to be still doing so at the end of the movie. Suitably re-clad in dress or skirt, she prepares to take her place in the family, leaving adventure to the men.<sup>6</sup>

What I want to argue, however, is that the rise of second-wave feminism demanded a

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<sup>4</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Pam Cook, 'Women', in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. by Edward Buscombe (London: Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), pp. 240-243 (p. 241).

fundamental realignment of these oppositions and thus of the myths or stories the western articulates. My analysis of the way in which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped over the western genre in the post-1970 period will thus offer a continuation of Will Wright's structural analysis of the western.<sup>7</sup> In the first section of this chapter, then, I will trace the differences and similarities between two female rape-revenge westerns – *Hannie Caulder* and *Handgun* – and Wright's 'vengeance variation'.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, I will explore the extent to which the introduction of new functions such as the rape avenging woman brings about changes at the level of narrative structure, the oppositions it articulates and thus the meanings it generates.

In the second section of this chapter, I will look at a range of rape-revenge westerns from the 1990s and my analyses here will involve supplementing the preceding emphasis on the formal and thematic content of the texts themselves with an emphasis on the discourses surrounding them. In particular, I will argue that the rape-revenge narrative's move into the mainstream during this period has meant that the role played by stars has become increasingly significant to an analysis of the way in which these narratives articulate changing conceptions of masculinity and femininity and, by extension, to the way in which they produce a set of meanings around feminism. In so doing, I will begin to explore the extent to which popular understandings of the 1990s as a period of post-feminism and backlash are articulated in these films. Finally, I will also suggest that such an analysis must take account of

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<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of clarity and brevity, female-centred deployments of the rape-revenge structure across the western genre will hereafter be described as female rape-revenge westerns.

<sup>8</sup> A further example of the female rape-revenge western can be found in *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1988). As an Australian film, however, it falls outside the parameters of this thesis and for this reason I do not include a discussion of it here. In addition, its relationship to the western, and particularly to the 'classical plot' described by Will Wright, has already been discussed at some length by Stephen Crofts in 'Identification, Gender and Genre in Film: The Case of *Shame*', *The Moving Image*, 2 (1993), 3-88.



the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics on genre, gender and the deployment of the rape-revenge structure.

### **VARIATIONS ON VENGEANCE: FRONTIER FEMMES AND THE 'VENGEANCE VARIATION'**

Despite limitations in the construction of his corpus, Will Wright's structural analysis of the western represents one of the most consistent and coherent attempts to map the genre.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that I use his work here as a template against which to analyse the female rape-revenge western. Wright identifies four main plot structures: the classical plot, the vengeance variation, the transition theme and the professional plot. It is the 'vengeance variation', however, that I will be concerned with here and, in order to facilitate a comparative analysis of the vengeance variation and the female rape-revenge western, it is first necessary to list Wright's functions for the vengeance variation in full:

1. The hero is or was a member of society.
2. The villains do harm to the hero and to the society.
3. The society is unable to punish the villains.
4. The hero seeks vengeance.
5. The hero goes outside of society.
6. The hero is revealed to have a special ability.
7. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given special status.
8. A representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge.

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<sup>9</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975). Wright's corpus is limited by his decision to confine his study to films which grossed \$4,000,000 or more.

9. The hero gives up his revenge.
10. The hero fights the villains.
11. The hero defeats the villains.
12. The hero gives up his special status.
13. The hero enters society.<sup>10</sup>

Of the female rape-revenge westerns under discussion here, *Handgun* most closely approximates this schema. Despite its contemporary setting, the film makes its reliance on the western myth clear not only by placing its central protagonists in the traditional and, more to the point, antagonistic roles, of eastern schoolteacher and western cowboy, but by locating its action in Texas where ‘more Westerns have been set [...] than in any other state’.<sup>11</sup> Kathleen’s position as a schoolteacher thus also fulfils function 1 of Wright’s schema by situating her as a member of society. However, while Kathleen’s rape at the hands of Larry (Clayton Day) also fulfils function 2, it does so only partially. In other words, although Larry does harm to Kathleen (Karen Young), he is not shown to do any direct harm to society. Indeed, whereas in the vengeance westerns Wright analyses the villains are *already* criminals (thieves, killers, gunrunners, bank robbers), here Larry is constructed as an apparently upstanding member of society.

Thus whilst *Handgun* also conforms to function 3 of the vengeance variation – ‘the society is unable to punish the villains’ – it does so for different reasons. In other words, in the vengeance variation whilst it is generally recognized that the villains are

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Buscombe, ‘Cowboys’, *Sight and Sound*, 6:8 (August 1996), 32-35 (p. 34). This debt is made explicit in the film’s US title, *Deep in the Heart*. It is perhaps also worth mentioning here that Kathleen is a teacher of specifically frontier history, whilst Larry is a collector of guns from the period.

evil, society is simply *unable* to punish them. However, in *Handgun*, an albeit sympathetic policeman tells Kathleen that successful prosecution of Larry is unlikely. Whilst he cites lack of evidence as a reason for this, the subtext is that since society does not recognize Larry as a criminal it will therefore be *unwilling* to punish him. Indeed, as he points out, because Kathleen was not a virgin at the time of the rape, the defence is likely to construct *her* as the criminal of the case, that is, as a whore (thus positioning her within another of the limited roles traditionally allocated to women in the western). Consequently, whilst function 2's pairing of individual and social crimes suggest that crimes against men are also necessarily crimes against (a patriarchal) society, *Handgun* points up how crimes against women have little currency in such a society. The exceptions to this rule are, however, revealing. In other words, the westerns in which the individual crime of rape and crimes against society are paired are frequently those in which the raped woman is engaged or married. More significant is that the crime against society is usually robbery, thus contributing to a reading in which rape and theft are conflated. Here, then, rape is not a crime against women but the 'theft' of the hero's 'property', a crime whose social resonance to a patriarchal society is symbolized through the villains' robbery (usually of the community's bank). In films such as *Rancho Notorious*, where the hero's fiancée is raped and murdered during a bank robbery, male society is therefore mobilized to avenge these crimes but is simply unable, rather than unwilling, to do so. Thus while in *Rancho Notorious* the hero's revenge is predicated on a patriarchal understanding of rape as the theft of male property, in *Handgun* the construction of rape as a crime specifically against women necessitates the introduction of a female avenger.

*Hannie Caulder*, unlike *Handgun*, nevertheless apparently fulfils the requirements of function 3 since Hannie (Raquel Welch) is a rancher's wife who is raped by three



outlaws as they flee from a robbery. However, whilst this too would appear to suggest the conflation of rape and the theft of male property, the film, in fact, disrupts such a reading by having the robbery fail and the outlaws kill Hannie's husband. Thus Hannie's rape, like Kathleen's, is constructed neither as a crime against individual male property or male society at large and, as I have suggested, it is for this reason that society is *unwilling* rather than unable to punish the perpetrators and that both women must seek their own revenge (function 4). These functions comprise what Wright calls the 'weakness' sequence.

In both *Hannie* and *Handgun* the 'weakness' sequence is followed by a set of functions Wright labels the 'commitment' sequence, the first of which is function 8 – 'a representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge'. In *Handgun* this representative takes the form of a priest and in *Hannie* it is a bounty hunter, aptly named Thomas *Price* (Robert Culp). Although Thomas repeatedly asks Hannie to give up her revenge *throughout* the film, in comparison to the vengeance variation, this function occurs at an unusually early point in the narrative of both *Hannie* and *Handgun*. In particular, in Wright's structure, before the hero is asked to give up his revenge, he is usually 'revealed to have a special ability' (function 6). In other words, he is proved capable of carrying out his revenge and is thus able to give it up (function 9) with no subsequent loss of 'masculinity'. For example, in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), Ringo (John Wayne) is an outlaw who has broken out of jail and his ability to help protect the stagecoach from Indian attacks is frequently remarked upon. In *One-Eyed Jacks* (Marlon Brando, 1961), Rio (Marlon Brando) is a thief whose reputation alone is enough to make Harvey (Sam Gilman) think twice about engaging in a violent confrontation with him early on in the film and, in *Nevada Smith* (Henry Hathaway, 1966), Max (Steve McQueen) kills two men before being asked to give up his

revenge. Even in *The Man from Laramie* (Anthony Mann, 1955), in which function 8 also occurs early on in the narrative, Lockhart's (James Stewart) ability to carry out his revenge is assured by intimations that he is, or was, a member of the army. In *Hannie and Handgun*, however, the heroines are asked to give up their revenge *before* proving their ability to carry it out. Thus, whereas in Wright's vengeance variation the representative of society tries to convince the hero to give up his revenge by pointing out 'the uselessness of vengeance or the fact that the hero is becoming like the men he hunts', in *Hannie*, in particular, Thomas's attempts to get Hannie to eschew revenge are based on his belief that she is incapable of it.<sup>12</sup> More significantly, this incapability is cast exclusively in terms of Hannie's perceived 'femininity'. In other words, Thomas argues that Hannie is too 'caring' to kill a man since, having merely knocked him unconscious, she was unable to leave him 'on the cold ground last night' but instead covered him with a blanket, built a fire and watched over him. Furthermore, he claims that she is also physically incapable since 'if I was to teach you the gun, you'd then go out and get your ass blowed off', adding that it would be a 'shame to get it shot full of holes – it is as pretty a one as I ever laid eyes on'. Thus, if the redefinition of rape as a crime against women in the female rape-revenge western suggests the possibility of a female avenger, conventional conceptions of femininity simultaneously work to deny this possibility. Consequently, if Hannie and Kathleen are to move from the margins of the western's symbolic world to its frontier, are to become frontier femmes, then these conventional conceptions of femininity will also need to be redefined.

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<sup>12</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 67.

Unlike their male counterparts in Wright's vengeance variation who subsequently give up their revenge (function 9) thus stressing their 'fundamental commitment to social values', Hannie and Kathleen do not give up their revenge and this function is therefore absent in the female rape-revenge western.<sup>13</sup> Whilst this is largely because a 'commitment to social values' would also entail a commitment to the patriarchal ideology that engenders rape and protects rapists, it is also because, having not yet been allowed to prove their special ability, to give up revenge would mean remaining in the position of passive victim which those 'social values' construct for women. Thus, whereas in the vengeance variation Wright's 'weakness' sequence is associated largely with society, rather than the hero, since 'the villains harm both the hero and society, but society can do nothing about it', in the female rape-revenge western the weakness of society accrues largely to the heroine herself.<sup>14</sup> In other words, although both the hero of the vengeance variation and the heroine of the female rape-revenge western are both initially constructed as part of society, the heroine's attachment to that society is stronger because of the perceived connection between 'femininity' and civilization in the western. Whilst this is apparent in Hannie's role as a wife, it is perhaps even more so in Kathleen's position not only as a schoolteacher, but as a schoolteacher specifically from the *East* (Boston). Indeed, the motif of Eastern schoolteacher as civilizing force is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in a classic of the genre, *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946). As Christine Gledhill has observed, here 'the hero's quest for personal revenge is translated into the establishment of law and order for the nascent township of Tombstone, under the

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 155.



influence of the heroine schoolteacher from the East'.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, whereas the hero is 'accepted as an equal' within that society, the heroine's weakness is compounded by her *unequal* status within that society and by its indifference to her plight.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, if the vengeance variation constructs society as 'simply a momentary victim', the western as a genre goes further by constructing women as *always already* victims.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in these films, it is the heroine rather than society that is constructed as weak, and this is subsequently reinforced, as I have argued above, by the early occurrence of function 8 and by the concomitant change in its ideological work. Consequently, the following sequence, which Wright labels 'status' (functions 5, 6 and 7) – in which the hero is defined against the weakness of society as 'a man with special status, a gunfighter outside of society' – holds a rather more central and complex position within the narrative of the female rape-revenge western. Against Wright, but in line with my more limited structural analysis of the rape-revenge narrative, I will call this sequence 'transformation'.

Describing the oppositions in the vengeance variation, Wright claims that 'the inside/outside distinction separates the hero from society [...]. The strong/weak opposition separates men from women [...]; the individuals are strong the society is weak'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the central opposition in the vengeance variation operates around 'individuals against values', the hero who is defined as strong and 'masculine' against the society which is defined as weak and 'feminine', whilst the villains 'have

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<sup>15</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Western', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 64-72 (p. 67).

<sup>16</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

an ambiguous location on this axis'.<sup>19</sup> In the female rape-revenge western the oppositions must necessarily be redefined since if, as in the vengeance variation, the 'feminine' and society are conflated there would be no opposition. Indeed, the individual against society opposition becomes particularly problematic in the female rape-revenge western because of women's ambiguous relationship to society. In other words, depending on one's perspective, women are both integral to society as wives, mothers and 'moral guardians' and excluded from it in terms of, for example, their access to positions of power and status. Consequently, instead of an opposition between individual and society, society itself becomes the site of opposition between the female protagonist and the male villain(s). Thus, whilst there is an implicit gender politics written into the vengeance variation through the way in which the opposition is gender coded – individuals (masculine) against society (feminine) – the female rape-revenge western makes this gendered opposition explicit. What I want to argue, then, is that in attempting to work through what is essentially a crude formulation of feminism (women versus men), these films engage with and attempt to make sense of some of the more sophisticated and complex debates and oppositions put on the agenda by feminism, specifically the sameness/difference debate and the public/private opposition. Thus the individual against society opposition is recast as a conflict *within* society not simply between men and women, but between a feminine private sphere and a masculine public sphere.

It is for these reasons that the female rape-revenge western's transformation sequences are rather more complex than the vengeance variation's 'status' sequence. For example, the first function in this sequence – 'the hero goes outside of society' –

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 154.

is only possible if the hero/ine was fully 'inside' that society in the first place. Thus, whilst Hannie and Kathleen's apparent rejection of the accoutrements of femininity can be interpreted as an attempt to step outside of the feminine identities sanctioned by society, there is also a sense in which this represents an attempt to gain a fuller purchase on that society by embracing masculine identities. Whilst not wholly a female rape-revenge western, *The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993) explicitly foregrounds this problem. In other words, the film's heroine, Jo(sephine) (Suzy Amis), is cast out of society for rejecting its standards of 'feminine' behaviour (she displays an active female sexuality by getting pregnant out of wedlock) and finds that the only way she can re-enter that society is as a man. Jo's transformation is, however, also a response to an attempted rape at the beginning of the film and thus, like the female avenger, her transformation includes an element of eroticization. As Stella Bruzzi points out, Jo's masculine clothes 'are at once functional and an eroticizing agent'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in *Hannie*, Hannie spends the early part of the film wearing nothing but a man's poncho which, whilst 'functional' in that it just covers her nakedness, is also erotic for the same reason. What I want to suggest, then, is that the trajectory of the female rape-revenge western is not towards masculinity (that is 'sameness'), but towards a renegotiation of 'difference' as it is articulated around the public/private opposition, towards, in other words, 'public' femininities.

Like the vengeance variation, both *Hannie* and *Handgun* include scenes *before* the final 'fight' in which they are given the opportunity to demonstrate their 'special ability'. However, although this would appear to fulfil function 6 of Wright's schema,

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<sup>20</sup> Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 180.



there are some significant differences. In particular, 'the hero is revealed to have a special ability' becomes 'the heroine *learns* a special ability but it is *not* revealed'. Thus whereas, with the exception of *Nevada Smith*, in the films Wright uses to illustrate his discussion of the vengeance variation the hero's acquisition of his special ability is not depicted, in *Hannie* and *Handgun* it becomes the central narrative focus. Consequently, while the former would appear to embrace an essentialist politics in which it is suggested that the hero's special ability is an innate part of his 'masculinity', the latter would seem to embrace a constructionist politics in which gendered behaviour can be acquired or learnt. This does not mean, however, that Hannie and Kathleen are simply 'masculinized'. In *Hannie*, in particular, Hannie's transformation is punctuated by repeated attempts to guarantee her 'femininity' (in a sense, always already guaranteed by the casting of archetypal sex symbol, Raquel Welch). For example, at various points during Hannie's transformation she is shown playing with children, bottle feeding a baby goat and walking hand in hand with Thomas on the beach, wearing a dress. Furthermore, when they are attacked by a band of Mexican's *after* Thomas has taught Hannie to shoot, whilst Hannie does shoot one of their attackers she is unable to deliver the fatal bullet and has to be 'saved' by Thomas. The shooting competition in *Handgun* similarly compromises Kathleen's acquisition of a special (masculine) ability. In other words, whilst Kathleen makes a good start she is ultimately disqualified because she shoots one of the 'friendly' targets. Here, however, it is suggested that Kathleen's failure is deliberate – as one of the male spectators comments: 'It looks like she did it on purpose.' What I want to suggest, is that, because this 'friendly' target is represented by a policeman, in shooting it Kathleen reveals her rejection of society and its laws and thus, like the vengeance hero, 'goes outside of society' (function 5). Despite these similarities,

however, the sequence, like the fight sequence in *Hannie*, also functions to point up Kathleen's femininity rather than her acquisition of a special (masculine) ability. This is achieved, in particular, through one of the male spectators, who comments: 'Jesus, look at her tits... Gosh, she moves just right... Wow, look at them bounce.'

The final function in Wright's 'status' sequence is function 7: 'The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given special status.' Yet, because in the female rape-revenge western the opposition is not based around individual/society but male/female, the 'difference' already exists and is, indeed, the narrative's main motivating force. However, as I have been arguing, this does not mean that the narrative trajectory is therefore towards 'sameness', that is masculinity. Rather, the issues of difference and sameness are articulated not around the binary masculinity/femininity but around femininity itself. This is particularly evident in the various transformations Kathleen undergoes in *Handgun*. At the beginning of the film, before the rape, Kathleen is represented through what one might describe as typical 'feminine' codes, that is, strappy, flowery sun-dresses and long hair. After the rape, however, she makes the transition to a plain, high-necked, long-sleeved smock dress and short hair, in which guise a male colleague comments that she 'looks terrible', that is 'not feminine'. Nevertheless, 'not feminine' here is not necessarily 'masculine' (as the next transformation indicates), nor is it, in fact, actually 'not feminine', since it is only so according to the standards of 'femininity' set by the sun-dresses and long hair. Furthermore, whilst Kathleen's subsequent and final transformation from smock dress to trousers would seem to secure and complete her movement from femininity to masculinity, here too, despite her occupation of the masculine 'public' space of the gun club, she remains 'feminine', as the comments about her breasts by a male spectator during the shooting competition (cited above)

indicate. Similarly, in *Hannie Caulder*, despite Thomas's initial claim that Hannie 'wants to be a man', a later conversation between the two reveals that she simply does not want to be 'the same person'. Thus, Hannie moves from being described by Bailey as 'a fine looking woman' to being described by the sheriff as 'a hard woman'. Furthermore, the absence of other female characters, notably Bailey's wife, against which Hannie's transformation can be measured, ultimately functions to emphasize Hannie's *difference* from the male characters. Indeed, the only time Hannie appears in the same frame as another woman is shortly before she kills the first rapist when, walking up the stairs in the saloon, she bumps into two finely dressed prostitutes. At this crucial structural juncture between transformation and revenge we are thus reminded both of the distance Hannie has travelled from such representations *and* her continuing proximity to them, as the Madame comments 'I don't remember hiring you'. Hannie, however, rejects the implied designation 'whore' by replying curtly 'You didn't'. Thus, while Kathleen and Hannie remain feminine, their movement from the margins of the western's symbolic world to its frontier – articulated, in particular, through their occupation of the public spaces of the gun club and the saloon – necessitates the development of what Hilary Radner describes as 'new categories and structures of femininity' or 'public' femininities to replace the marginal, private femininities of the school teacher and wife. In this way, then, the frontier femme can be read as an attempt to articulate and make sense of the changing shape and status of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period.

In *Handgun*, the structural juncture between transformation and revenge is particularly illustrative of what is at stake in this movement from the margins to the frontier of the western's symbolic world. This juncture occurs during the scene in which Kathleen is getting dressed ready for her final confrontation with Larry. The



scene opens with the camera tracking up her body from her feet to her face, so that initially we do not know to whom, or indeed to what gender, the boots and trousers belong. Moreover, from the position of the camera and Kathleen's facial expressions we can tell that she is looking in a mirror and, in fact, the shot appears to be taken from the point of view of her mirror-image. We do not, however, ever see her mirror-image. The scene then cuts to an over-the-shoulder shot of *Larry's* mirror-image as, naked from the waist up, he lifts weights. Thus, in an interesting variation on the shot/reverse-shot structure, Kathleen's mirror-image is replaced with Larry's. Whilst the juxtaposition of these two shots could be read as an attempt to contrast and therefore point up the *difference* between the 'fake' male (as it is constructed through clothes) and the 'real' male (as it is revealed through the 'natural' body), it could also be argued that the suturing of the *two* shots into *one* shot structure attempts to point up the *similarities* between Kathleen and Larry (the latter as the mirror-image of the former).

Clearly, then, this shot structure invites analysis in terms of Lacan's mirror-stage where the mirror-image is both 'me' and 'not me', similar and different. While this project has, as a whole, eschewed psychoanalytical paradigms, in this instance, I think a Lacanian *influenced* analysis delivers an interesting and revealing reading, particularly insofar as Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic can be read as metaphorically articulating some of the oppositions that have concerned me here (sameness/difference, private/public). What I want to argue, in other words, is that in order to move from the margins of the western's symbolic world to its frontier, from the private sphere to the public sphere, Kathleen must pass from the realm of the 'imaginary' and sameness, through the 'mirror-stage', into the realm of the 'symbolic' and difference. Thus Kathleen moves through closeness to the image of woman as

victim, through identification with the 'other', more coherent and unified masculine (mirror) image. However, in order to create the potential for the signification of the self, in order to designate rather than to *be* designated, Kathleen must separate herself from both these images. In other words, if access to the symbolic is marked by the loss of self-identification, it is also afforded by the recognition of sexual difference. Consequently, whilst Larry represents the more coherent and unified self, he also represents the image, the object to which Kathleen must become subject if she is to enter the (symbolic) realm of institutions, law, sociality and most importantly, signification, from which she has been excluded. Thus, shortly after the scene depicting the 'mirror-stage', Kathleen telephones Larry from the gun club and effectively 'plays out' the image of woman as victim, asking Larry to come and 'save' her and, in so doing, distances herself both from this image and from the masculine mirror-image represented by Larry. It is this recognition of sexual difference which allows Kathleen to enter the symbolic realm of signification. Indeed, as Kathleen tells Larry, 'it's just as though I'm just waking up', and it is this coming to consciousness, this entry into language and designations, that enables Kathleen to effect her revenge by positioning herself as subject and aggressor and Larry as object and victim. However, such access to signification has a price. In other words, the symbolic is the realm of no return and, consequently, while Kathleen will perhaps never again occupy the 'private' femininity of the victim, she has entered the realm of sexual difference where, for better or worse, she will always be a woman – as the film's final shot, cemented by the freeze-frame, of Kathleen wearing a dress and earrings holding a child in her arms, testifies.

Like the classic western, described by Pam Cook at the beginning of this chapter, then, *Handgun*, would appear to 'work away at the problem of re-establishing sexual

boundaries'. As I hope to have shown, however, the introduction of a female avenger into the western's symbolic world means that those boundaries must be negotiated and re-defined. In particular, the distinction between the private feminine sphere and the public masculine sphere comes under pressure as Kathleen increasingly moves into the public space of the gun club. Thus despite the absence of function 9 – 'the hero gives up his revenge' – through which, in the vengeance variation, the hero demonstrates his commitment to the values of society, the narrative trajectory of *Handgun* is similar to that of the vengeance variation. In other words, the movement of both is towards the hero/heroine's entry into society (function 13). Because of women's marginal position within the western's symbolic/social world, however, the way in which this function is accomplished, and hence its ideological meaning, is somewhat different. For the hero of the vengeance variation this is achieved through his willingness to give up his revenge and the subsequent 'accidental' or compromised nature of his defeat of the villains. In contrast, for the heroine of the female rape-revenge western, revenge is the very pre-requisite that will enable her to move from the margins of the western's symbolic/social world to its frontier, hence her reluctance to give it up. Thus, whereas in the vengeance variation, function 13 represents a restoration of the status quo – articulated in particular through the motif of heterosexual romance and the ideology of the separate spheres (in both *The Man from Laramie* and *One-Eyed Jacks*, for example, the heroes ride off into the masculine public sphere of action and adventure, leaving the heroine to the feminine private sphere of home and family) – in *Handgun* Kathleen's accession to citizenship through revenge represents a challenge to this ideology. Nevertheless, her revenge, whilst deliberate and calculated is similarly compromised. In other words, whilst in *Handgun* Kathleen had previously rejected the law (by shooting the 'friendly' policeman target),



in order to take her place within the public domain through revenge she must show her acceptance of that law by simply humiliating Larry rather than killing him and by disposing of her gun (thus complying with function 12, 'the hero gives up his special status'). Thus, while *Handgun* can be seen as attempting to articulate and make sense of the changing shape and status of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period, it does so within a framework which ultimately endorses existing aesthetic and social structures.

The ending of *Hannie Caulder* is slightly more ambiguous, concluding with Hannie riding off into the desert. Whilst this would seem to concur with Wright's argument that 'three of our vengeance heroes reject their status and power by leaving town', what is not so clear is whether Hannie will also change her 'ways, enter society, and settle down'.<sup>21</sup> What *is* clear is that she is still only competent in the private 'feminine' spaces (the prostitute's bedroom, the perfume shop) where she kills the first two rapists. These are, however, also the spaces in which heterosexual femininity is traditionally reproduced and transformed. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that it is in these spaces that Hannie's transformation from the private femininity of the wife to the public femininity of the frontier femme/female avenger is made manifest. Nevertheless, in the public 'masculine' space of the prison she needs male help, which comes in the form of the mysterious stranger who has haunted her progress. Thus, whilst demonstrating that she is no longer a victim by cutting to a flashback of the rape at the moment Hannie delivers the final, fatal bullet, Hannie's revenge, like Kathleen's, is also 'compromised' (not least because the three rapists are largely

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<sup>21</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 68.

portrayed as inept buffoons). Furthermore, at the end of the film, Hannie is still 'chaperoned', as she has been throughout, by a male character. In this case, it is the mysterious 'man with no name' mentioned above, an oblique reference to the star persona of Clint Eastwood and to the spaghetti westerns of the period, a man whose presence, according to Pam Cook, 'is a reminder of a final boundary Hannie can never cross. For women can never really be heroes in the Western: that would mean the end of the genre.'<sup>22</sup>

### **HARD WOMEN AND SOFT MEN: POST-MODERNISM, POST-FEMINISM AND BACKLASH**

Across a range of film genres, however, the evidence would seem to increasingly suggest otherwise. In other words, as the recent coining of critical terms such as Clover's 'female victim-hero' and Tasker's 'action heroine' testify, women are increasingly being positioned as the hero(in)es of traditionally 'masculine' genres.<sup>23</sup> This is perhaps partly due to the way in which, under the increasing influence of post-modern aesthetics, the codes and conventions of established genres have been subject to hybridization, parody and ironic quotation thus opening up a space in which the traditional gender identities those genres construct can be revised and negotiated. In relation to *Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1994), for example, Yvonne Tasker has argued that

making use of a range of conventions and images drawn from the genre,  
the film parodies the Western without explicitly becoming comic.

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<sup>22</sup> Pam Cook, 'Women', in *The BFI Companion to the Western*, ed. by Edward Buscombe (London: Museum of the Moving Image, 1991), pp. 240-243 (p. 242).

<sup>23</sup> Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (London: BFI, 1992).

Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993).

Elements of parody partly stem from the 'role-reversal' involved in casting four women at the centre of the Western action, given the conventional roles typically assigned to women in the genre. Perhaps in an attempt to legitimate the central female roles, *Bad Girls* also looks to the women's film, and takes certain images of sexualized violence against women and their vengeance from the rape/revenge cycle.<sup>24</sup>

While *Bad Girls* thus relies on a fairly 'straight' deployment of the rape-revenge structure to legitimate its central female roles, other female-centred westerns of the period subject the rape-revenge structure itself to post-modern articulations. *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995), for example, does away with rape and transformation and leaves only the figure of the vengeful woman. This foregrounding and legitimization of heroic female roles within traditionally masculine genres is not, however, simply a product of post-modern aesthetics. Rather, as Susan Jeffords points out, this revision and negotiation of traditional gender roles can also be read as 'U.S. gender culture's response to feminism, civil rights, and a declining Cold Warrior validation'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as women become 'harder', men, according to Jeffords, are apparently becoming 'softer':

1991 was the year of the transformed U.S. man. There's hardly a mainstream Hollywood film from that year with a significant male role that does not in some ways reinforce an image that the hard-fighting,

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<sup>24</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Approaches to the New Hollywood', in *Cultural Studies and Communications*, ed. by James Curran, David Morley and Valerie Walkerdine (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 213-228 (p. 224).

<sup>25</sup> Susan Jeffords, 'The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 196-208 (pp. 197-198).



weapon-wielding, independent, muscular, and heroic men of the eighties – Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), Colonel Braddock (Chuck Norris), Dirty Harry (Clint Eastwood), John McClane (Bruce Willis), Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson), Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford), Superman (Christopher Reeve) – have disappeared and are being replaced by the more sensitive, loving, nurturing, protective family men of the nineties.<sup>26</sup>

Jeffords, however, does not explore how these transformed ‘family men’ might function within a context which has been widely defined, amidst calls for a return to ‘family values’, as one of backlash against feminism. Moreover, despite the reference here to Clint Eastwood, an actor whose star persona is intimately connected to the western, she does not explore how her argument might relate to the current resurgence of interest in this, most ‘masculine’ of genres. Whilst the credit for this revival lies largely with *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), the recent spate of female-centred westerns – *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *Bad Girls* and *The Quick and the Dead* – I want to suggest, are perhaps best understood in relation to the films and star persona of Clint Eastwood. Indeed, the female rape-revenge western’s debt to Eastwood is apparent not only, as I have suggested above, in the reference to ‘the man with no name’ in *Hannie Caulder*, but in its construction of the heroines themselves. For example, in *Hannie Caulder*, Hannie herself ‘borrows’ Eastwood’s style of dress, the poncho and flat-topped, rigid-brimmed hat made famous in his first Italian western, *A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, 1964). Furthermore, as Christopher Frayling argues, Burt Kennedy’s films owe ‘much to the narrative structure of the “Dollars” trilogy’ with *Hannie Caulder* ‘closest in impact to Leone’s

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 197.

early westerns'.<sup>27</sup> In *The Ballad of Little Jo*, Jo again sports the Eastwood hat, while *The Quick and the Dead* is, as Ben Thompson observes, full of 'Spaghetti Western quotes – blind boy, coffin maker measuring up the hero etc.'. <sup>28</sup> Ellen, for example, wears the dirty long overcoat of the spaghetti hero and at one point chews on a trademark Eastwood cigarillo. That such stylistic 'borrowings' continue throughout the female revenge westerns of the period suggest that the confluence between Eastwood's star persona, particularly as it was constructed in his Leone westerns, and these 'frontier femmes' is more than accidental.

The clue to this confluence, can perhaps most obviously be found in Leone's resistance to the classic western, in the fact that his westerns, like the female rape-revenge western, are essentially revisionist. However, it can also be found in Christine Gledhill's suggestion that Eastwood's westerns 'are liable to be discussed as much in terms of the Eastwood image and how it speaks to a post-68, "post-feminist" crisis in male identity as in terms of its contribution to and development of western traditions'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, *Hannie Caulder* explicitly foregrounds this 'post-68' transformation in the western's preoccupations in Hannie's comment to the sheriff: 'Like the man says, there aren't any hard women, only soft men.' Of course, this preoccupation is not confined to Eastwood's westerns, but is in fact a central motif in much of his work, one that is particularly apparent in his directional debut *Play Misty for Me* (1971) and his subsequent involvement in the 'vengeful woman' tradition (*Sudden Impact*). For example, according to Adam Knee, *Play Misty for Me* is

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 284.

<sup>28</sup> Ben Thompson, 'The Quick and the Dead: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 5:9 (September 1995), 58-59 (p. 59).

<sup>29</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Western', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 64-72 (p. 71).

‘indicative of a passing moment of progressive questioning of traditional constructions of male identity prior to the conservative reaction which launched [Eastwood] to greater macho stardom’.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore in one of Eastwood’s most recent films, *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), in which both the ‘vengeful woman’ and the western traditions are combined, that the working through of a “post-feminist” crisis in male identity’, gains its fullest expression.

The action of the film is ostensibly motivated by an incident at the beginning of the film in which a prostitute’s face is slashed by one of her clients. The sheriff of the town, ‘Little Bill’ Daggett (Gene Hackman), at first elects to whip the perpetrator and his friend, but then decides to make them pay a fine in the form of horses which, significantly, is due to the brothel-owner rather than the mutilated woman. In an attempt to critique such sexual politics – in which women are treated as little more than men’s property – the film has the outraged prostitutes pool their savings in order to put a price on the men’s heads. Yet, whilst it is the prostitutes’ desire for revenge and the bounty-hunters this attracts that apparently motivates the film’s action, I would argue that it is motivated instead by the fact that the mutilated prostitute precipitated the attack by giggling at her client’s ‘teensy little pecker’, a slight against ‘masculinity’ which is compounded when the prostitutes deliberately undermine the sheriff’s authority. In other words, the opening sequences of the film represent a world in which men are, or have been, ‘unmanned’ by women. Lest we need any confirmation of this, it is worth noting that the prostitute’s name is Delilah, she who, in the Old Testament story, robbed Samson of his strength by cutting off his hair.

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<sup>30</sup> Adam Knee, ‘The Dialectic of Female Power and Male Hysteria in *Play Misty for Me*’, in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 87-102 (p. 101).



Furthermore, it is not just the villains who are 'emasculated' by women, but the hero too.<sup>31</sup> In the film's prologue we learn that William Munny (Clint Eastwood) was 'a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition'. Yet when we first meet him he is the embodiment of the transformed US man of the early 1990s described by Jeffords. As Christopher Frayling observes: 'It is made clear that Munny has become a sensitive single parent to his two children, dislikes cruelty to horses as well as to women, and has generally turned New Age.'<sup>32</sup> The credit (or blame) for this transformation is, moreover, placed firmly with Munny's dead wife, Claudia who, he is fond of saying, 'cured me of drinking, wickedness'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, unlike the vengeance variation's emphasis on tracing the hero's status in relation to society, *Unforgiven*, like the female rape-revenge western, is concerned with mapping the hero's transformation in relation to sexual politics. However, the film is far from a homage to the transformative potential of feminism, not least because one only has to scratch the surface of the film's apparent critique of sexual politics to see that, underwriting the motivating 'face slashing' incident, is the age-old myth that a prostitute cannot be raped (which is the usual motivation for revenge where women are concerned in the western). Furthermore, as Frayling writes: '*Unforgiven* reverses

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<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Janet Thumin has pointed out: 'All the central male characters are shown to be deficient in a skill that they themselves value and need. Their inadequacies are not just shown in passing [...] they are emphatic – leitmotifs, almost: Will's falling off his horse, the Kid's near blindness, the Sheriff's diabolical carpentry.' Janet Thumin, "'Maybe He's Tough But He Sure Ain't No Carpenter': Masculinity and In/Competence in *Unforgiven*", in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, ed. by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), pp. 234-248 (p. 237).

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Frayling, '*Unforgiven*: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 2:6 (October 1992), 58.

<sup>33</sup> The theme of men's emasculation at the hands of women can also be found in *The Beguiled* (Donald Siegel, 1970). Eastwood plays a wounded Unionist soldier taken in by the inhabitants of a women's school who, towards the end of the film, symbolically castrate him by amputating his wounded leg.

the progression of the earlier films by having its central character gradually revert to type as a gunfighter, instead of settling down in a little house on the prairie.<sup>34</sup>

It is this transformation which Mark Simpson traces in his analysis of *Unforgiven*.<sup>35</sup> Examining the film alongside Robert Bly's *Iron John*, he attempts to demonstrate not only 'the permeation of Bly's ideas in American popular culture but also [...] their remarkable *symmetry* with the work of Eastwood (a masculinity "guru" from an age before the men's movement)'.<sup>36</sup> Bly is the leader of the US men's movement and his philosophy, briefly, is that men have been 'feminized' or made 'soft' (explicitly) by women and (implicitly) by feminism in particular. He crusades, through his publications, conferences and weekend workshops, to restore men to the position of 'warrior' or 'wild man'. And, this, according to Simpson, is also the project of *Unforgiven*'s narrative trajectory. In other words, at the film's end, William Munny 'is finally restored as "William Munny" ["the meanest sonofabitch in the West"] [...] and for Bly he is a soft man made hard'.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, however, for my purposes, he is also 'Clint Eastwood again, a reassuring Good Bad Guy, replacing the tormented, ineffectual, *embarrassing* Good Good Guy'.<sup>38</sup> In other words, what I want to argue, is that the film is essentially *about* 'becoming Clint Eastwood' and the conflation of the man and the myth into one, coherent star persona. Thus, whilst in the film's prologue 'William Munny' is simply a mythical character, by the film's epilogue he has disappeared to San Francisco, Eastwood's birthplace, and thus become 'Clint Eastwood'. Indeed, the Munny/Eastwood myth is curiously exempt from what,

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher Frayling, 'Unforgiven: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 2:6 (October 1992), 58.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 258.

elsewhere in the film, appears to be an attempt to expose the mechanisms of myth – the deconstruction of the ‘Duke of Death’ myth is one example, the exaggeration of the face-slashing incident into a full-scale rape and mutilation is the other. Eastwood’s purpose in deconstructing the western myth seems therefore to have been to reconstruct *himself* as the western’s *only* myth. As Christopher Frayling observes:

*Unforgiven* goes against the grain of recent Westerns (*Silverado*, *Young Guns*) by eschewing irony and hipness and fashionable post-modernism.

The references seem to be there to anchor Eastwood’s odyssey within a hallowed tradition, rather than to show off about the hollowness of that tradition.<sup>39</sup>

Thus the film not only articulates a backlash against feminism (not least in its formulation of a conservative family values agenda in which it is suggested that the only effective father is a powerful, authoritarian one), it articulates a backlash against the revisionist tendencies of the Leone westerns. As Paul Smith observes ‘what is at stake in [Eastwood’s] post-Leone westerns is a determination to reverse the effects of the spaghetti westerns: in short, the restitution of a genre’.<sup>40</sup> For this reason, I would argue that Janet Thumin’s claim that *Unforgiven*’s fascination for the female audience lies in the way in which ‘in deconstructing the myths of the west the film is also obliged to deconstruct the myths of the masculine’, is perhaps more applicable to Sam Raimi’s spaghetti-influenced female revenge western *The Quick and the Dead*.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Frayling, ‘*Unforgiven*: Review’, *Sight and Sound*, 2:6 (October 1992), 58.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 42.

<sup>41</sup> Janet Thumin, “‘Maybe He’s Tough But He Sure Ain’t No Carpenter’: Masculinity and In/Competence in *Unforgiven*”, in *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, ed. by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), pp. 234-248 (p. 245).



Indeed, the film's obvious debt not only to the spaghetti western and the Eastwood persona but to *Unforgiven*, suggest that it can, in part at least, be read as an attempt 'to reverse the effects' of the earlier film.<sup>42</sup>

Gene Hackman, as John Herod, for example, reprises his role in *Unforgiven* as the sadistic, despot ruler of a small western town and, as the biblical reference suggests, names and the myths surrounding them are similarly significant. For example, in *Unforgiven*, English Bob (Richard Harris) is constructed by his biographer, W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), as 'The Duke of Death' and, in *The Quick and the Dead*, men are similarly, and perhaps more consistently, defined through their relation to violence. 'Scars', for instance, adds a scar to his arm every time he kills a man, while 'Ace' adds an ace to his deck of cards. Herod, of course, is he who, in the New Testament story, was responsible for the 'massacre of the innocents'. Like *Unforgiven*, *The Quick and the Dead* also attempts to deconstruct these myths. Indeed, in a scene remarkably similar to the one in *Unforgiven* where Daggett exposes the 'Duke of Death' myth, Herod challenges the myths Ace has constructed around himself:

HEROD I wanted to ask you about Indian Wells. Did that fight really  
take place?

ACE Sure did.

HEROD Then it's true that you gunned down four men?

ACE Two with my left hand, two with my right. See the truth is that  
I'm just as good with either.

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<sup>42</sup> Clearly, in its exploration of what happens when a group of prostitutes take their own revenge, *Bad Girls* represents a more obvious but, I think, less sophisticated, response to *Unforgiven*.

HEROD You must be the fastest gun in the west.

ACE It's a pity you weren't there to find out.

HEROD (*laughs*) Oh but I was Ace. You see I was the one that really killed the Terence Brothers. I doubt whether a lying little shit like you was even in the same state.

*Herod shoots Ace in the right hand*

HEROD How about that left hand Ace, how about that left-handed draw?

*Herod shoots Ace in the left hand and then kills him.*

*The Quick and the Dead*, however, goes further than *Unforgiven* towards undermining these myths of masculinity. The film is peopled with men boasting of their ability and their exploits, but one by one they become the victims of their own myths. Spotted Horse, for example, repeatedly claims that he 'cannot be killed by a bullet' and then is, whilst the Kid boasts that, unlike Herod, he has just reached his 'peak', before, of course, being gunned down by him. *The Quick and the Dead* thus represents a world in which men are resoundingly the victims. Moreover, unlike *Unforgiven*, these 'soft' men are largely shown to be the victims, not of women, but of each other, their own 'masculinity' and the western myth itself. Thus, whereas, in *Unforgiven*, and in the western in general, women are characterized as the 'problem' or the source of disruption to be 'solved' by the narrative, in *The Quick and the Dead* it is the conservative, patriarchal family, as it is symbolized through the figure of the repressive, authoritarian father, which is shown to be problematic.

For example, the narrative suggests that Herod is the man he is because one day, his father, a judge, took a bullet, put it in his gun, spun the chamber, then took it in

turns clicking it at Herod, his wife and himself until he finally blew the back of his own head off. Thus, with his annual quick-draw competition, Herod 'becomes' his father by making the townspeople play a similar game of Russian Roulette. In turn, the Kid (Leonardo DiCaprio) is like he is because his father, Herod, disowns him and Ellen (Sharon Stone) because of what Herod did to *her* father. Finally, Cort (Russell Crowe) has renounced violence and become 'soft' not, as in *Unforgiven*, because of a woman but because Herod made him kill a 'padre' (derived from the Latin 'pater' meaning 'father'). Furthermore, we learn that Cort was initiated into violence by Herod himself, who therefore becomes something of a father-figure to Cort. Thus, despite Herod's repeated claims that violence is in Cort's 'blood', the film's emphasis on the influence of fathers on their children and on deconstructing myths of masculinity would seem to support a constructionist rather than an essentialist reading of identity formation. Indeed, at the beginning of the film it is revealed that Cort has been working in a mission with 'orphan children' and that he has thus reinvented *himself* as a preacher or 'good father' who, moreover, stands in opposition to Herod's 'bad father'. The 'good fathers' of the film are, however, wholly ineffectual. For example, in the film's brief 'rape-revenge' sub-plot, Horace the bartender's daughter, Katie, is raped by Eugene. While Horace clearly *thinks* about trying to shoot Eugene, he is unable to and it is thus left to Ellen to avenge Katie's rape by aptly shooting Eugene in the genitals. Furthermore, Ellen's father is unable to protect himself from Herod and his men and it is Ellen who must try and save him, while Cort, as preacher/father, would rather die than take a stand against Herod. Moreover, whilst Ellen is unable to save her father she does save Cort from a similar fate who, thereafter, becomes a 'stand-in' for her father (to whom he bears a remarkable resemblance).



Thus, whilst in one sense the film is a critique of a corrupt and/or ineffectual patriarchal order, in another, it is about the recuperation or transformation of that order and, by extension, of the western's symbolic world. At the end of the film, then, although the 'law of the father' is, quite literally, re-instated when Ellen gives Cort her father's marshall badge and tells him 'the law's come back to town', the symbolic world which those laws govern is transformed. In other words, it is Cort rather than Ellen who is positioned in the traditional 'feminine' role of civilizing force, and it is Cort as 'father', rather than Ellen, who is left to look after 'the family' of townspeople. Consequently, while *The Quick and the Dead* also parallels *Unforgiven* in its inclusion of a 'hard' man turned 'soft', unlike *Unforgiven* its project is, as Elizabeth Traube argues in relation to the representation of 'domestic man' in the films of the 1980s, the rehabilitation of 'patriarchal authority along nontraditional lines'.<sup>43</sup> Unlike the films Traube discusses, however, the film does not effect a concomitant recuperation of the 'nondomestic woman'. For example, although as a reformed outlaw turned preacher, Cort recalls Eastwood's preacher in *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1985), unlike Eastwood, he is unable to save the town from the tyranny of the robber-baron(s). Instead it is Ellen, who like the preacher in *Pale Rider*, rides into town, redeems Redemption, then rides back to the horizon. In an obvious reversal of the end of *Unforgiven*, then, where Delilah looks yearningly after Munny as he rides out of town, Cort is left standing in the street watching Ellen gallop into the distance. Thus, *The Quick and the Dead*, like *Unforgiven*, eschews heterosexual romance as a containing device for the 'hard' (wo)man and is therefore

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<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 138.

unable to imagine a place or function for the hard (wo)man *within* the immediate social world of the film. What I want to suggest is that, in order to begin to think about the way in which the hard woman might function within the wider social and historical context, and particularly the way in which, in articulating changing conceptions of femininity, she produces a set of meanings around feminism, we need to look beyond the world of the film to the star persona of Sharon Stone.

While Ellen clearly has affinities not only with Eastwood's 'Pale Rider', but with his 'man with no name' persona – not only because Herod repeatedly asks her 'Who are you?', but also because she is only once, towards the end of the film, referred to by name – unlike Munny in *Unforgiven*, she does not 'become Clint Eastwood'. This is partly because what is essentially a parody of a parody (as Yvonne Tasker points out, 'there is more than a little irony in Eastwood's persona, as the Man with No Name') tends to question rather than reinforce Eastwood's macho star persona.<sup>44</sup> However, it is also, I think, due to the strength of Stone's star persona. Thus, if *Unforgiven* can only be fully understood in terms of the star persona of Clint Eastwood, then *The Quick and the Dead* can perhaps only be fully understood in terms of the, albeit more contemporary, star persona of Sharon Stone. What I want to argue, in particular, is that if in *Unforgiven* the process of transformation, of 'becoming Clint Eastwood', can be read as articulating a backlash against feminism, in *The Quick and the Dead*, Sharon Stone comes to us as a fully formed articulation of a post-feminist sensibility. Thus, this is the only female (rape-) revenge western under discussion here that does not feature the obligatory transformation sequence, largely,

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<sup>44</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 68-69.

one assumes, because, after the success of *Basic Instinct*, Stone has effectively 'become' Catherine Tramell and is thus always already believable as a 'hard' woman. Indeed, the critical and commercial failure of her post-*Basic Instinct* film *Sliver* (Philip Noyce, 1993) is perhaps partly attributable to the fact that it cast her in the role of victim rather than villain – as one profile of the star argued, 'the public was not interested in Stone as an actress, but as a character'.<sup>45</sup> Ben Thompson implicitly points up the continuities between *Basic Instinct* and *The Quick and the Dead* as they are articulated around Stone's star persona, when he observes that the latter film has 'Sharon Stone striking *another* blow for womankind by shooting male chauvinists with her big gun'.<sup>46</sup> Of course, Stone's depiction of a psychopathic lesbian killer in *Basic Instinct* was more widely read not as 'striking a blow for womankind', but as constitutive of a wider backlash against feminism. At the very least, the film's engagement with feminism was seen to be compromised by Tramell's sexiness and apparent heterosexuality. Similarly, Thompson argues that *The Quick and the Dead's* 'feminist credentials could hardly be less convincing. Stone's Ellen has a mysterious tendency [...] to forget to do up her shirt buttons when she leaves the house.'<sup>47</sup> In other words, Stone's construction as a sex symbol was seen as an implicit rejection of feminism. Yet as Suzanne Moore asks:

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<sup>45</sup> 'Stone Cast Without Sin', *The Observer* (LEA), 29 October 1995, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Ben Thompson, 'The Quick and the Dead: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 5:9 (September 1995), 58-59 (p. 59, my emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 58-59. *Bad Girls* was similarly received. Leslie Sharman, for example, argued that 'Bad Girls is more or less in [the] revisionist strain, featuring as it does four wronged women fighting against a patriarchal society which does not recognise a woman's right to own land or shoot a man in self-defence. Or so it seems on the surface. In actual fact, *Bad Girls* is about as politically correct as a L'Oreal hair mousse commercial.' Leslie Felperin Sharman, 'Bad Girls: Review', *Sight and Sound*, 4:7 (July 1994), 37-38 (p. 38).



What is a symbol of sex meant to be doing in the nineties, I wonder?  
 Selling herself to Robert Redford for a million dollars? [...] Crawling  
 around in head-to-toe rubber a la Pfeiffer or flogging herself to her richest  
 client like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*? In this context, it's no wonder  
 Stone made it on the basis of just one movie. What she sold us was far  
 sexier than mere sex. It was the ultimate aphrodisiac – a fantasy of  
 power.<sup>48</sup>

What I think Moore articulates quite neatly here is the way in which Stone's star  
 persona, as it has been constructed through her portrayal of Catherine Tramell, is  
 post-feminist not in the sense that it rejects feminism, but in the sense that, to use  
 Charlotte Brunsdon's definition, it marks historically specific 'changes in popularly  
 available understandings of femininity and a woman's place that are generally  
 recognised as occurring in the 1980s'.<sup>49</sup> Particularly indicative of these shifts, and of  
 Stone's articulation of them, is the emergence of figures such as the 'lipstick lesbian'  
 (Tramell is the obvious example, but examples also include Madonna, Susan in  
*Friends* and Beth in *Brookside*), a figure who is 'post-feminist' insofar as she is both  
 dependent on and dismissive of traditional feminist identities. Thus, while *Basic  
 Instinct* may have been read simply as a rejection of feminism, as Moore observes:

What caught the public imagination – and particularly the female  
 imagination – was the Katherine Tramell character, a beautiful, sexy,  
 clever woman who does what the hell she likes and gets away with it.

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<sup>48</sup> Suzanne Moore, 'A Sliver Off the Old Block', *Guardian* (G2), 10 September 1993, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 101.

Stone was established, like Madonna, as a sex symbol for women as well as for men. And she has been trading on this particular sexual persona ever since. In interviews, she is sharp, sassy, full of bold one-liners such as: "Since becoming famous, I get to torture a better class of man." Meanwhile the tabloids have rushed to print stories about how hard and heartless she really is [...].

Stone was by now where we wanted her to be: firmly in control.<sup>50</sup>

Again, Moore's description neatly illustrates Brunsdon's definition of the post-feminist woman. According to Brunsdon, this figure

has a different relation to femininity than either the pre-feminist or the feminist woman. [...] Precisely because this postmodern girl is a figure partly constructed through a relation to consumption, the positionality is more available. She is in this sense much more like the postmodern feminist, for she is neither trapped in femininity (pre-feminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist). She can use it. However, although this may mean apparently inhabiting a very similar terrain to the pre-feminist woman, who manipulates her appearance to get her man, the post-feminist woman also has ideas about her life and being in control which clearly come from feminism. She may manipulate her appearance, but she doesn't just do it to get a man on the old terms. She wants it all.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Suzanne Moore, 'A Sliver Off the Old Block', *Guardian* (G2), 10 September 1993, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 85-86.

In the first part of the following chapter I want to explore how this notion of ‘having it all’ is articulated in a recent deployment of the rape-revenge structure, *The Last Seduction*. In so doing, I want to pick up on what is implicit in Brunsdon’s reference to consumption here – the way in which notions of ‘having it all’ are understandable not simply in terms of feminism, but in terms of a Reaganite yuppie culture of consumption and success. In the second half of the chapter I will turn my attention to another recent deployment of the rape-revenge structure, *Batman Returns*, and explore how the film attempts to make sense of feminism within the context of increasing calls for a more morally restrained capitalism centred around family values. I will thus be expanding upon and contextualizing some of the issues that have been raised in this discussion of the Stone star persona as it was constructed through her role in *Basic Instinct*, particularly the relationship between post-feminism, post-modernism and the contemporary neo-noir.



## CHAPTER 6

### RAPE-REVENGE IN POST-MODERN HOLLYWOOD

The late 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a profound resurgence of interest in the codes and conventions of film noir amongst Hollywood filmmakers. This, in turn, has proved to be of particular interest to feminist film theorists concerned to trace the filmic manifestations and contours of the 'backlash' against feminism that, it is widely agreed, occurred in the late 1980s and 1990s. Given the apparent continuities between this contemporary backlash and the backlash film noir is said to articulate against women's changing status following the second world war, such readings are clearly seductive ones. As Julianne Pidduck has observed in her discussion of the contemporary 'fatal femme' cycle:

The link between gender issues in classic and contemporary *film noir* is more than coincidental. For if the *femme fatale* in wartime and post-war cinema is often connected to a deep-seated unease in the shifting gender roles in that society, the fatal femme offers fertile ground for theorists to speculate on the perceived threat of feminist gains in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Such analyses, however, are, at best, predictable, and at worst, over-simplified. In particular, they not only tend to assume that noir and *neo*-noir are identical and therefore have the same ideological function, they tend to overlook precisely those changes in the social, political and cultural context that the prefix 'neo' should alert us to. More worryingly, they work to install the backlash thesis as the *only* way of understanding feminism in the 1990s, a pessimistic position which can lead only to

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<sup>1</sup> Julianne Pidduck, 'The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme: (Dis)figuring Feminism, Family, Irony, Violence', *Cineaction*, 38 (1995), 65-72 (p. 65).

political paralysis. While I do not doubt that there has been a backlash against feminism in the 1990s, and that some aspects of this backlash are concomitant with that of the 1940s (for example the call for a return to 'family values'), I do think that this continuity should alert us to the fact that feminism and changes in the position of women in society have *always* invited backlashes. No ideology, moreover, even a backlash ideology, is monolithic. Rather, within a hegemonic society, ideology will always be subject to negotiation. It is these negotiations that I want to trace here, particularly those that occur when the ideological conventions of film noir meet both the rape-revenge structure and the cultural and political discourses of the late 80s and 90s in two neo-noirs of the period, *The Last Seduction* and *Batman Returns*. In so doing, I want not so much to counter the backlash thesis, as to suggest that the understandings of feminism these films produce are not only or always those of backlash politics, and to look at some of the alternative ways in which they can be seen to make sense of feminism.

Before doing this, however, I want to sketch out some of the key contextual changes that distinguish the noir moment from that of the contemporary neo-noir and which therefore inform my argument. The most obvious of these changes concerns the rise of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s. While some of the transformations in women's lives brought about by second-wave feminism are similar to those that occurred in the post-war period (for example, the movement of women out of the home and into the workplace), they are not simply continuous with them. Rather, the changes second-wave feminism has effected are not only more extensive and more sustained (concerning not only women's right to work but women's legal, economic, reproductive and sexual rights), they are enshrined in law (in equal opportunities, divorce, abortion and rape laws). Moreover, these changes

are increasingly being taken for granted, are entering into our common-sense understanding of the world. The concomitant emergence of the female rape-revenge narrative during this period is also significant for two related reasons. Firstly, for the way in which it has legitimated the actions of the violent and often erotic female figure, a figure who clearly has affinities with the femme fatale of film noir. Secondly, for the way in which the codes and conventions of rape-revenge appear to be finding their way in the neo-noirs of the 90s. From the erotic thrillers of Paul Verhoeven (*Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls*) to the neo-noirs of Tim Burton (*Batman Returns*) and John Dahl (*Kill Me Again* and *The Last Seduction*), the narrative structure and motifs of the rape-revenge cycle are currently being *recycled* alongside those of film noir.

The third contextual change relates to the emergence and influence of the New Right on both sides of the Atlantic during this period. While the backlash against feminism has often been attributed to the right-wing ideologies of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, many of these ideologies, particularly as they were popularly articulated through yuppie culture, can actually be seen as continuous with the goals of feminism. Jane Feuer's summary of the key elements of Reagan-era yuppie culture as it was constructed in the media is suggestive of some of these continuities. Yuppie culture, for example, included elements such as 'career obsessiveness, especially for women', 'emphasis on the two-career childless couple' and 'equality for women; sensitivity for men'.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in Britain, as Julia Hallam has observed, 'Thatcher's emphasis on "enterprise" and individual success

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Feuer, 'Feminism on Lifetime: Yuppie TV for the Nineties', *Camera Obscura*, 33-34 (1997), 133-145 (p. 135).



seemed to offer new opportunities for women as well as men.’<sup>3</sup> It is thus from within this context, in which upward-mobility, consumerism and acquisitiveness were not only emphasized, but legitimated, that traditional interpretations of the femme fatale’s transgressive greed and ambition would seem to demand reinterpretation.<sup>4</sup>

The final contextual difference between the film noirs of the 40s and the neo-noirs of the 90s concerns the shift from a modernist to a post-modern aesthetic. Jean Baudrillard has described post-modern culture as a culture of the present made from fragments of the past: ‘All that remains is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces – that is postmodernism.’<sup>5</sup> Rather than simply reproducing the codes and conventions (and thus the ideology) of film noir, then, neo-noirs can be seen to ‘play’ with these fragments of the past, subjecting them to parody or ironic quotation. In this respect, I will be largely contesting the analysis of neo-noir outlined by Fredric Jameson in his seminal article on post-modernism.<sup>6</sup> Here, Jameson draws a distinction between pastiche and parody, arguing that pastiche is like parody in so far as it relies on imitation, but unlike parody in that it has no ‘ulterior motives’ or ‘satiric impulse’. Pastiche is thus ‘neutral’ or ‘blank parody’ in which the mimicry of past styles is without irony or purpose.<sup>7</sup> Jameson’s example of pastiche in contemporary culture is significantly the neo-noir or what he describes as the ‘nostalgia’ film (*Chinatown*, 1974 and *Body Heat*, 1981). According to Jameson,

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Hallam, ‘*Working Girl*: A Woman’s Film for the Eighties’, in *Gendering the Reader*, ed. by Sara Mills (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1994), pp. 173-198 (p. 176).

<sup>4</sup> See for example:

Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (London: M.I.T. Press, 1994), p. 199.  
 Janey Place, ‘Women in Film Noir’, in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67 (p. 46).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 128.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 62-92.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

these films represent a 'desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past'.<sup>8</sup> However, they do not attempt to recapture a 'real' past but simply an 'image' of the past, such that 'the history of aesthetic styles displaces "real" history'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Jameson argues that 'nostalgia films', such as *Body Heat*, have been carefully constructed so as to efface 'most of the signals that normally convey the contemporaneity of the United States in its multinational era'.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, he claims that 'we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience'.<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, on the other hand, argues that the

parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical. It is also not ahistorical or de-historicizing; it does not wrest past art from its original historical context and reassemble it into some sort of presentist spectacle. Instead, through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference.<sup>12</sup>

It is the ideological consequences which derive from the continuity and difference between past and present representations that I will be concerned to trace in this chapter. In particular, I will be exploring how the 'parodic reprise' of film noir reconfigures the backlash against women of the 1940s in a way that can be seen as both specific to, and an attempt to make sense of, 'our own current experience' in the late twentieth century.

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 93.



Post-modern culture is, however, characterized not only by the parody of past representations and styles, but also by a pluralism of styles and genres. As I have suggested, many contemporary neo-noirs are marked not only by a self-conscious deployment of the codes and conventions of film noir, but also by a playful recycling of the narrative structure and motifs of the rape-revenge cycle. Throughout I have been arguing for the historical specificity of this cycle in relation to the rise of second-wave feminism and Janey Place has put forward some similar arguments with regard to film noir. Place argues that film noir should be considered not as a genre, but as a movement which, 'in fact, touches every genre':

For a consideration of women in film noir, this is more than a semantic dispute. Film movements occur in specific historical periods – at times of national stress or focus of energy. [...] The attitudes toward women evidenced in film noir – i.e., fear of loss of stability, identity and security – are reflective of the dominant feelings of the time.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter will therefore explore the significance of this post-modern combination of these two quite discreet, historically specific cycles of films. What happens when the pre-second-wave feminist narratives of the film noir cycle meet the 'feminist' narratives of the rape-revenge cycle in an era that has frequently been characterized as one of 'backlash' against feminism? How is this combination negotiated and what meanings does this negotiation produce in terms of feminism in the 1990s? I will thus also be examining the relationship between these post-modern films and that other highly contested 'post' – post-feminism. In her survey of contemporary

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<sup>13</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67 (p. 37).



feminism, Imelda Whelehan claims that much recent feminist thinking is marked by a 'schizophrenic viewpoint', suggesting that feminism is currently undergoing an 'identity crisis'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Boyne and Rattansi have argued, the 'postmodern condition' can be characterized as 'one of coincidence between "crises in representation"' in both the arts and political movements.<sup>15</sup> What then might the post-modern representation of both feminism and feminine identity tell us about feminism in the 1990s?

### HAVING IT ALL: *THE LAST SEDUCTION*

As I have already suggested, John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* represents a playful combination of the motifs and narrative structures of both the film noir and rape-revenge cycles. Yet, while Dahl's interest in playing with the conventions of film noir is widely established, his perhaps more unconscious interest in the conventions of rape-revenge has yet to be remarked upon. For those familiar with Dahl's work, however, this combination should not come as a surprise, particularly since it is one that is apparent in his mainstream directorial debut, *Kill Me Again* (1989). Here, the femme fatale, Fay (Joanne Whalley-Kilmer), and her boyfriend, Vince (Michael Madsen), literally 'act out' the rape-revenge structure (he pretends to rape her, she pretends to kill him) in order to trick the private detective, Jack (Val Kilmer), into leading them to the money he has buried. Indeed, Dahl even foregrounds the structure's nature as filmic convention by positioning Jack as the voyeuristic male spectator in the wardrobe. In this early example, however, Dahl ultimately falls back onto a traditional deployment of the conventions of film noir by violently eliminating

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<sup>14</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 216.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Angela McRobbie, 'New Times in Cultural Studies', *New Formations*, 13 (Spring 1991), 1-17 (p. 1).

the duplicitous femme fatale. Dahl's next two films, *Red Rock West* (1993) and *The Last Seduction* (1993), however, were financed on the Hollywood fringes (both were screened on cable television before making their theatrical debuts) and can thus be seen as less constrained by the commercial and ideological imperatives and formulas of mainstream Hollywood. Indeed, in the latter film, the heroine's ability to 'mirror write' or write backwards functions not only as a self-conscious reference to her role as a duplicitous femme fatale, but as a marker of the film's concern with reversing conventional expectations of genre and gender.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, it suggests that we, like the heroine's husband (who is forced to hold his wife's note up to a mirror in order to decipher it), will need to abandon established strategies of reading if we are to make sense of the film.

In line with its deployment and combination of the discourses of both the film noir and rape-revenge cycles, *The Last Seduction* can be seen to tell two stories. On the one hand, it tells a story of female ambition and greed which is clearly borrowed from the film noirs of the 40s. On the other, it tells a 'feminist' story which is clearly borrowed from the rape-revenge narratives of the 70s and 80s. Within the context of the 1990s, however, these stories are given specific contemporary inflections. The film noir story of female ambition and greed, for example, is translated and updated into a Reaganite story of individual success and upward mobility, while the 'feminist' rape-revenge story becomes a 'tale' Bridget tells to explain and justify her behaviour. In so self-consciously foregrounding the rape-revenge story *as* story, the film expresses not only a hyper-awareness of the conventions of the rape-revenge

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<sup>16</sup> As Janey Place has argued: 'Another possible meaning of the many mirror shots in film noir is to indicate women's duplicitous nature. They are visually split, thus not to be trusted.' Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67 (pp. 47-48).



story which is purely contemporary, but an understanding of that story's function as one of the ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism. The post-modern play with the conventions of film noir and rape-revenge thus results in the intersection of an 80s success story with a feminist story. It is this intersection and its consequences for feminism that I will be concerned to investigate here.

Elizabeth Traube has described the 80s success story as a narrative not only in which women were marginalized, but in which they were often positively demonized:

During the 1980s Hollywood filmmakers turned with renewed energy to stories of individual mobility and success. The scaled-down dreams of 1970s melodramas such as *Rocky I* or *Saturday Night Fever* gave way to grander, generically comic fantasies of the unrestricted triumph of desire. Only men, however, enacted the more expansive dream. Unlimited ambition in women continued to be constructed as a threat, requiring either their subordination to the appropriate men or their expulsion from the imagined community. During the Reagan era [...] a fantasized threat of female power, embodied in women and in feminized enemies, became instrumental to an ongoing ideological project of remasculinization.<sup>17</sup>

Traube's analysis thus operates broadly within the logic of the backlash thesis and, while her conclusions are somewhat pessimistic, her pursuit of this argument in relation to her chosen films is, on the whole, convincing. It is not my purpose here then to critically engage with Traube's analysis. Rather, I want to explore the extent

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 97-98.



to which *The Last Seduction*'s specific take on the success story departs from the ideological project Traube identifies with that story.

The plot synopsis which appears on the film's video jacket explicitly identifies the film with the desires for affluence and upward-mobility characteristic of the 80s success story. Unlike the 80s success story, however, it is a woman who is situated as the subject of this fantasy of 'the unrestricted triumph of desire': 'Bridget Gregory (Fiorentino) wants it all. And she wants it now. No matter what it takes. No matter who gets hurt.' While this description could be referring to the acquisitive femme fatale of a 40s film noir, the use of the specifically post-second-wave feminist notion of 'having it all' points towards the film's updating of the noir story. This contemporary retelling of the noir story as both a feminist story and as an 80s success story is confirmed in the opening sequence. Here two different types of commercial transactions are juxtaposed: Clay (Bill Pullman) selling a suitcase of pharmaceutical cocaine to two black guys and his wife, Bridget (Linda Fiorentino), bullying a team of telephone salespeople selling commemorative coin sets. From the outset, then, the film is set firmly within the political context and discourses of the 80s, a period succinctly described by Arthur Marwick as the 'era of buying and selling'.<sup>18</sup> It is within this context, furthermore, that the cocaine deal also functions, since as Marwick observes, 'cocaine was the drug of the eighties' and 'the staple of one facet of yuppie life-style'.<sup>19</sup> According to Marwick, the roots of the yuppie phenomenon lay in 'the large incomes and commissions to be earned in finance, accountancy, law, in agencies and consultancies of all kinds, as well as in commerce. [...] combined with vigorous propaganda on behalf of the notion that success was far more

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<sup>18</sup> Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 325.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 364.

important than social origins'.<sup>20</sup> In many ways, then, *The Last Seduction* sets itself up as a drama of upward mobility and as an articulation of the yuppie ethos of success by any means necessary. As we later learn, the motive behind the drugs deal is Bridget's desire for 'new digs', specifically a 'penthouse', a motive which is, according to the yuppie ideology articulated by Bridget, a 'wholesome one'. Indeed, the film is careful to point up that the selling of commemorative coin sets, whilst obviously legal, is perhaps no more 'wholesome' than drugs dealing. The duplicity involved is made particularly apparent when, given the choice between 'a thousand dollars worth of rare commemorative coins' and a hundred dollars cash as commission for a sale, one of the salespeople unhesitatingly chooses the cash.

This opening sequence, however, is also understandable in terms of feminism and the changing position of women and, as I have suggested, it is within this register that the 'wanting it all' of the video synopsis also makes sense. Here the influence of feminism is discernible principally through the figure of the 'career woman'. For example, Bridget is not only a working woman, she is a *saleswoman* and thus occupies a position diametrically opposed to the traditionally feminine position of consumer. More than this, she actually supervises a team of, predominantly male, telesales personnel who are economically dependent on her for the cash commissions she has the power to distribute. Indeed, throughout, the film repeatedly articulates a common-sense discourse about women and work which simply would not have been possible without second-wave feminism ('A woman loses fifty percent of her authority when people find out who she's sleeping with', 'A woman has to protect her standing at the office, *you know that.*'). In contrast, Clay, whilst similarly occupying the position of salesperson, lacks Bridget's power because he is not in

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 325.



control of money. Consequently, *The Last Seduction* constructs a world in which white men's power, represented as largely economic, has been usurped by traditionally oppressed groups such as blacks and women, leaving white men in the position of economic dependants. While, in many respects, this is simply the logical extension of the ideology of the 80s, particularly the yuppie idea that success is far more important than social origins, it is also an index of the changing position of women and minorities brought about by the collective social movements of the 60s and 70s.

Toppled from their position of economic superiority, white men become demasculinized. Clay, for example, as the name suggests, is soft and malleable, whilst Bridget describes the male telesales personnel as 'eunuchs'. Simultaneously, however, money becomes feminized. For example, after the two black men empty the briefcase full of money onto the ground, Clay is forced to stuff the proceeds of the drugs deal into his shirt, giving him a 'pregnant-looking' bulge which he subsequently 'gives birth to' on the sofa. Furthermore, on inspecting the bundles of notes, Bridget remarks: 'They're soft. I thought they'd be stiff.' In other words, money is no longer endowed with phallic attributes and instead begins to take on traditionally feminine characteristics.

The connection between Bridget and the ideology of the 80s is made even more explicit when, having absconded with the money, she is forced to stop for petrol. The scene opens with a close-up of a large sign which reads 'self-serve only' from behind which Bridget emerges. The camera then follows her to her jeep which is being filled by a male attendant. Clearly, the ironic juxtaposition of images here undermines the denotative meaning of the sign and suggests that Bridget would rather get men to do her dirty work for her. On a connotative level, however, the sign neatly encapsulates



the ethos of the 80s, whilst the camera work functions to position Bridget as the embodiment of that ethos. Lest we fail to make this connection, the connotative meanings of the sign are reinforced shortly afterwards when Bridget's lawyer asks whether she is 'still a self-serving bitch'.

The question that remains, however, is what all this has to do with rape-revenge and feminism? As I have already argued, the representation of Bridget as an economically independent career woman has clearly been enabled not only by the Reaganite ideology of success through individual initiative, but by feminism. More significantly, while the opening sequences function to construct the film as an 80s success story, they also work to suggest that the film's subsequent narrative trajectory might also be understandable as a tale of female revenge. This becomes particularly apparent in the scene where Clay returns home with the proceeds from the drugs deal stuffed down his shirt. In response to Bridget's claim that he was an 'idiot' to 'walk the streets like that', Clay strikes her hard across the face.

Immediately contrite, however, he tells her: 'Hey, you can hit me, anywhere – hard.' During the course of the narrative Bridget will take up his offer to exact her revenge, but not in quite the literal way he anticipates. Indeed, the way in which this narrative of female revenge intersects with the 80s success story also has some unexpected effects, principally on the way in which the film makes sense of feminism. In particular, at key points throughout the film, Bridget's acquisitiveness, selfishness and greed are legitimated through recourse to feminist discourses, specifically those around violence against women which the rape-revenge narrative articulates. For example, on two occasions during the course of the film, Bridget attributes her actions to the fact that Clay hit her:

CLAY            Give me the money back.

BRIDGET       It's mine. You hit me.

CLAY            I slapped you.

BRIDGET       It's mine.

On one level, then, the film represents the co-option of 1970s feminist discourses around violence against women to the Reaganite yuppie ideology of the 1980s. The co-option of these feminist discourses is, however, both knowing and self-conscious, as Clay and Bridget's second exchange makes explicit:

CLAY            Oh Bridge, what made you do this?

BRIDGET       I don't know. You slapped me.

CLAY            That's just an excuse.

BRIDGET       You're probably right, but I get to slap you back.

Yet, while the self-consciousness inherent in this deployment of feminist discourses works to undermine their function as a legitimating device, this is only partial. In other words, although it is recognized that the deployment of feminist discourses of domestic violence is 'just an excuse' for Bridget's behaviour, it is nevertheless those same feminist discourses that enable Bridget to 'slap [Clay] back' with impunity. Furthermore, the exchange represents an articulation of the slippage inherent in feminist discourses between domestic violence as a physical actuality ('You slapped me') and domestic violence as a metaphorical expression of power (the ways in which Bridget contrives 'to slap [Clay] back'). It is this slippage, moreover, which enables feminist discourses to be appropriated for ends that are not *specifically* feminist.



The irony implicit in the film's deployment of feminist discourses also means that the film can rely on those discourses at the same time as it disavows or critiques them. It is worth noting, however, that the film invokes a particular *type* of feminist discourse, one that has been described by Naomi Wolf, amongst others, as 'victim feminism'. Victim feminism has recently been the subject of several feminist critiques and is defined by Wolf as 'when a woman seeks power through an identity of powerlessness'.<sup>21</sup> This definition would appear to be particularly applicable to the way in which feminist discourses are deployed in *The Last Seduction*. In other words, Bridget repeatedly adopts an 'identity of powerlessness' or invokes and utilizes a discourse of victim feminism to get what she wants. For example: she tells her new employer in Beston that her husband beat her in order to convince him to conceal her true identity; she tells Mike that Lance Collier (one of the men on the 'cheating husbands' list) also beat his wife in order to convince him that killing him is justified; she explains away Harlan's death by pretending he was about to indecently assault her; and she escapes the second private detective by phoning the police and pretending that he has indecently exposed himself to her young daughter.

As I have suggested, however, this identity of powerlessness is adopted both knowingly and self-consciously, especially since Bridget is so clearly constructed as *not* a victim. Indeed, the film repeatedly exposes the gap between this identity and Bridget's identity as a 'self-serving bitch' and this is, in fact, where a good deal of the film's humour comes from. Particularly noteworthy is the scene in which Mike (Peter Berg) begs her to open up and let him love her. After implying that she has been hurt by men once too often, Bridget confesses shyly, 'Maybe I could love you'

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<sup>21</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 147.

See also: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993).



then, with perfect comic timing, snarls ‘Will that do?’. In addition, Bridget’s displays of feminine sweetness or helplessness are so hugely exaggerated that they are virtually parodies of feminine behaviour. These are therefore also the points at which the film can be seen to be most clearly engaging and negotiating with the discourses of feminism. More specifically, the film’s use of parody functions to mark both its reliance on, and disavowal of, 70s feminism. For example, in revealing how femininity is socially constructed, such parodies suggest that the film has been informed by a feminist critique of the perceived naturalness of gender roles. Simultaneously, however, Bridget’s parody of feminist attempts to claim special treatment on the basis of victim status suggests an equivalent critique of victim feminism. In particular, by masquerading as a victim, Bridget questions the authenticity of that identity and of the feminist politics associated with it, particularly its claims to represent the truth of women’s experience. Consequently, rather than reproducing the standard feminist distinction between a manipulative feminine identity and an authentic, truthful feminist identity, the film collapses these two identities, suggesting that the latter’s adoption of an identity of powerlessness is little more than another addition to the repertoire of wiles and manipulation through which women have traditionally got their way. This is not to say, therefore, that there is an authentic self behind Bridget’s masquerade of powerlessness. Rather, the self behind the masquerade is itself a construction composed of fragments of media images (the femme fatale, the yuppie career woman). Indeed, as Bridget herself says to Mike: ‘I work here now. Don’t fuck with my *image*.’ Of course, many may find *The Last Seduction*’s mockery of the stereotype of ‘woman as victim’ extremely problematic.

Yet, as Charlotte Brunsdon has argued, 'a feminist project can only gain from a rather more provisional, attentive, even ironic, sense of self – and other'.<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere, feminist ideas are treated playfully, ironically or even irreverently (as at the end of the film, where Bridget literally *asks* to be raped – a point to which I will return), and it is perhaps examples such as this which prompted Philip French to argue that the film operates 'at the point where the extremes of misogyny and feminism meet'.<sup>23</sup> As I have been suggesting, however, I think the film in fact functions at the point where the discourses of feminism and the discourses of Reaganism meet and, in negotiating this intersection, the film represents an attempt to make sense of the relationship between these two sets of discourses. The influence of Reaganism can be seen specifically in the film's construction of a world where anything can be brought or sold (sex, murder, information, time – 'I'll buy a week'), where everything is reduced to a matter of economics even, as we have seen, domestic violence. Indeed, this is a world in which even heterosexual relations are conducted in the language of the market place. For example, when Mike tells Bridget that he is 'hung like a horse', she insists on taking a look. When Mike protests, she retorts: 'I don't *buy* any things I don't see.' Moreover, when she continues by asking Mike how many lovers he has had, he replies: 'What, do I get extra *credit points* for experience.' While this exchange perhaps owes as much to AIDS as to Reaganism, it also owes something to feminism, particularly feminism's critique of the economics of marriage as a form of 'legalized prostitution' in which women are little more than sexual commodities. Feminism itself, nevertheless, also becomes inscribed in the market place as a consumer item. Here, for example, feminism quite literally

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<sup>22</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Pedagogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres', *Screen*, 32:4 (Winter 1991), 364-381 (p. 381).

<sup>23</sup> Philip French, 'Beware of Brutal Brunettes', *Guardian* (Review), 7 August 1994, p. 10.



becomes an ‘advertising fiction’, as Bridget, the consummate saleswoman, ‘sells’ various versions of the feminist ‘story’ to a number of men who are only too happy to prove their feminist credentials by ‘buying’ her product. Likewise, in order to ‘sell’ the idea of murder to Mike, Bridget frequently resorts to feminist discourses either of domestic violence (she argues that killing Lance Collier is justified because he beat his wife) or equality (she claims she wants ‘a relationship of equals’ based on them both committing a murder).

This emphasis on selling, and particularly on its connotations of trickery, links with Bridget’s manipulation of feminist and feminine identities to position her within a lineage of representations of American success heroes, comprehensively described by Elizabeth Traube: ‘The archetypal comic success hero [...] is a trickster who succeeds through cunning, duplicity, and the artful manipulation of images’ rather than through honest hard work.<sup>24</sup> Traube goes on to argue that:

If the concept of the performing self had origins in popular antebellum comedy, its future was tied to the growth of the professional-managerial class. During the twentieth century, an older delight in image-making would be incorporated into the bureaucratic and consumption ethics of late capitalist society.<sup>25</sup>

A term that appears frequently in Traube’s discussion of this ‘corporate shape-changer’ is ‘seduction’.<sup>26</sup> Given its centrality to *The Last Seduction*’s title, Traube’s use of this word is illuminating since it points to the complex ways in which the

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<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, *ibid.* pp. 104-105 where there are three uses of ‘seductive’ and two of ‘seduction’.



‘seduction’ of the film’s title might make sense. In other words, while dictionary definitions key into the film’s *noiresque* construction of dangerous female sexuality (‘charm, entice, allure (*usu* to evil)’), Traube’s analysis alerts us to its corporate applications.<sup>27</sup> Of course, women have always had a privileged relation to dressing-up and therefore to both seduction and identity transformation. Indeed, image-manipulation is a key narrative motif not only of the success story, but of the film noir and rape-revenge cycles. The centrality of identity transformation to the latter has already been well-documented in preceding chapters and thus here I will refer only to Christine Gledhill’s observations concerning the ‘changeability and treachery’ of the femme fatale.<sup>28</sup> Traube argues, however, that while success stories construct ‘image-manipulation’ and ‘bureaucratic seduction as a positively valued style for men’, they ‘simultaneously [discourage] its cultivation by women, whose career ambitions are ritually tamed in the basic plot’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, she goes on to suggest that the taming of the career woman these films enact represents a means of reintroducing ‘the theme of moral discipline into success stories’.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of this process is the representation and narrative trajectory of Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver) in *Working Girl*. Traube’s description of Katherine as a ‘true shape-changer’ and ‘predatory seductress’, who ‘dispassionately includes sex among the resources at her disposal for controlling others’, is also a fairly accurate description of Bridget. Katherine, however, unlike Bridget, is ultimately expelled and punished for her corporate duplicity and predatory sexuality.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Penguin English Dictionary*, comp. by G. N. Garmonsway, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 655.

<sup>28</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism’, in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 6-21 (p. 18).

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 106.

According to Traube this comes in the form of a ‘symbolic phallic punishment’ whereby the heroine’s earlier disparaging reference to Katherine’s “bony ass” is appropriated by the businessman, Trask, and used ‘as a metonymic transformer that deprives Katherine of her dangerous, seductive sexuality prior to her expulsion’.<sup>31</sup>

There is a further link here with *The Last Seduction*, where reference is also made to Bridget’s ‘bony ass’. Unlike, *Working Girl*, however, it is the man who makes the comment, rather than Bridget herself, who is subsequently punished and deprived of his (albeit mythical) dangerous sexuality. Bridget has been trapped in her car by Harlan (Bill Nunn), the black private detective hired to find her by Clay. Realizing her only means of escape is to crash the car in the hope that she will kill Harlan whilst she is saved by the driver’s side airbag, she attempts to get Harlan to remove his seat belt by asking him if it is true that black men are particularly well-endowed. Initially refusing to take the bait, Harlan simply retorts by asking whether it is true that white women have bony asses. However, after Bridget has taunted him by suggesting that he is simply trying to hide his ‘shortcomings’, he agrees to show her his penis. While he is distracted with undoing his seat belt and trousers, Bridget accelerates and drives into a tree. Harlan goes through the windscreen and is not only killed, but suffers the additional ignominy of dying with his trousers down. Bridget, on the other hand, survives and, indeed, it is *precisely* her ability to shape-change, to transform herself, when questioned about the incident, into the image of desexualized white femininity (in which register the ‘bony ass’ comment functions) which allows her to avoid any implication in Harlan’s death and thus to *escape* punishment. Consequently, unlike films such as *Working Girl*, which attempt to reintroduce the theme of moral restraint into success stories by punishing the female corporate

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.



shape-changer, *The Last Seduction*, as one reviewer put it ‘has no moral other than “bad girls win”’.<sup>32</sup>

This peripeteia, I think, represents an interesting example of the way in which the anti-feminist ideology the 80s success story identified by Traube intersects with, is transformed by, and transforming of, the discourses of the film noir and rape-revenge cycles. The scene, for example, clearly constitutes a playful and self-conscious articulation of the anxieties about masculine identity and sexuality which were characteristic of film noir.<sup>33</sup> Unlike film noir, however, these anxieties are not overcome by destroying the threat to masculinity embodied in the figure of the femme fatale. On the contrary, the desire to overcome the anxiety by attempting to prove masculinity is shown to lead not to the destruction of the femme fatale, but to the destruction of masculinity itself. There are clearly continuities here then with the rape-revenge structure, where equivalent attempts to assert masculinity (through the act of rape) are similarly destroyed (through the act of revenge). Indeed, Bridget’s explanation for Harlan’s death relies on a playful deployment of the rape-revenge structure (as she says it was ‘like in the movies’), and particularly of certain rape myths (for example, those of the black male rapist and of the white female victim). Here, however, it is patriarchy, in the form of male authority figures (Harlan and the detective investigating his death), rather than women, who are shown to be the victims of such myths. Unlike film noir, then, *The Last Seduction* holds the law up as an object of ridicule rather than of authority and, in so doing, aligns itself with the rape-revenge cycle’s rejection and circumvention of the law. Finally, the specific form Bridget’s shape-changing takes here aligns her with the transforming female

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Romney, ‘Vital Video: Sleazy Does It’, *Guardian* (G2), 2 December 1994, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> The self-consciousness of this articulation of the discourses of film noir is made explicit by Harlan’s direct reference to Freud in his comment that ‘The Freudian mind-fuck isn’t going to work either’.



avengers of rape-revenge (although the traditional direction of those transformations – victim to avenger – is reversed).

The climax of the film invites a similar kind of analysis. The plot here clearly owes a good deal to perhaps *the* classic film noir, *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944). The reference, however, is both knowing and self-conscious. For example, Bridget herself refers to the film's title when explaining her plan to Mike and she also assumes the name Mrs. *Neff* (the surname of *Double Indemnity*'s male protagonist) in order to facilitate her final escape from the second private detective. Indeed, that Bridget associates herself with Neff (Fred MacMurray) rather than the more obvious choice of the femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), is significant since it alerts us to the fact that, while the film's resolution may *borrow* from the plot of *Double Indemnity*, we should not expect it to fulfil the same ideological function in relation to gender. More explicitly, the alignment of Bridget with Neff, rather than Phyllis, would appear to have a two-fold purpose. Firstly, it functions to privilege Bridget's role as a career woman over her role as a femme fatale since both she and Neff, the association reminds us, have careers selling insurance. Although film noir does not entirely exclude the femme fatale from the world of work, as Christine Gledhill has observed, it specifically situates them in bars and night-clubs and thus in occupations that 'emphasise the sexual objectification of women'.<sup>34</sup> The occupational differences the film constructs between Bridget and the femme fatale therefore also serve to emphasize its contemporary rendition of film noir as an 80s success story with a feminist subtext. This is made explicit in the film's particular take on the *Double Indemnity* plot.

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<sup>34</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 6-21 (p. 15).

Bridget, like Phyllis, needs to convince Mike to kill her husband. Unlike Phyllis, however, she does this not by constructing herself as the sexual reward for compliance, but by appealing to Mike's desire for upward mobility ('You want to live bigger, but there's nothing you'd kill for').

What finally clinches Mike's decision to go to New York and kill Clay/Cahill (his false belief that the transvestite, Trish, he mistakenly married is coming to Boston to 'be near' him) nevertheless sets the film firmly back within the parameters of film noir and especially those of *Double Indemnity*. As both Richard Dyer and Claire Johnston have observed, for example, the relationship between Neff and Keyes (Edward Robinson) in *Double Indemnity* can be read as implicitly homosexual.<sup>35</sup> The motif of Mike's marriage to Trish is, however, not only characteristic of film noir's articulation of anxieties about masculinity, it is also the film's central narrative enigma. In this respect, then, the film is constructed according to film noir's traditional investigative narrative structure: the enigma is set up early on in the film's first bar scene (Mike's sojourn in Buffalo and mysterious marriage), is subject to investigation during the course of the narrative (Bridget's visit to Buffalo) and finally resolved in the closing scenes (Mike married a transvestite). Clearly, where this structure differs from that found in film noir is in its reversal of the gendered patterns of such investigations. In other words, as Christine Gledhill has observed, in classic film noir it is 'woman' and particularly 'the secrets of female sexuality' that frequently become 'the object of the [male] hero's investigation'.<sup>36</sup> In *The Last*

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<sup>35</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 91-99 (p. 92).

Claire Johnston, '*Double Indemnity*', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 100-111.

<sup>36</sup> Christine Gledhill, '*Klute* 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 6-21 (p. 15).



*Seduction*, as we have seen, those roles are reversed.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, that Mike is the object of Bridget's investigative gaze is established by the first shot of him which is (indirectly) motivated by Bridget's gaze at the bar from the petrol station. This shot, moreover, uses the standard cinematic conventions usually used to represent and construct the 'feminine' (close-ups, soft-focus, slow motion and 'raunchy' music). Bridget's 'masculinity', on the other hand, is suggested both by her association with the city (her pseudonym is New York backwards) and by Mike's belief that she represents 'a new set of balls'.

In typical noir style, however, Bridget, the bad city girl is also contrasted with Stacy, the good country girl and this partly functions to stabilize gender relations by positioning Bridget on one side of the virgin/whore dichotomy.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, while it is worth noting that the country/city opposition is also a key motif of the rape-revenge cycle, here I think it marks the point at which the conventions of film noir intersect with the dynamics of the contemporary success story. It is within this register that the 'new set of balls' comment is perhaps also best understood. In other words, Mike sees women like Stacy as 'anchors' and thus as blocks to upward mobility ('you get too close to one, Beston's got you for life'), whilst he sees women like Bridget as representing a 'new set of balls' and thus as a route to upward mobility. The connection is made explicit by Mike's claim that he will leave Beston when he has grown 'a new set of balls'. When Mike expresses an interest in Bridget, his friend retorts 'that's city trash, man [...] what do you see in that?', Mike's reply – 'a new set of balls' – refers back to his earlier comment and thus situates Bridget, as

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<sup>37</sup> The irony, here, of course is that Mike is a 'claims adjuster'. In other words, like Barton Keyes in *Double Indemnity*, he *investigates* people's insurance claims.

<sup>38</sup> For an interesting explication of this opposition and of the country/city opposition in general, see Colin McArthur, 'Chinese Boxes and Russian Dolls: Tracking the Elusive Cinematic City', in *The Cinematic City*, ed. by David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 19-45.



representative of the city, as his means of escape from Beston. In this respect, then, the character of Mike is clearly continuous with that of Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* who, as Sylvia Harvey explains, 'seeks an escape from the dull routine of the insurance company that he works for, in an affair with the deadly and exotic Phyllis Dietrichson'.<sup>39</sup>

As we have seen, however, by the end of the film it is Bridget rather than Mike who is associated with Neff. Within the context of the film's reversal of the gender conventions of film noir, this association functions to prefigure the gender reversal that occurs in the film's climactic scene where Bridget dresses up as a man (right down to the y-fronts) and taunts Mike into raping her by pretending she is Trish. Here, then, the codes and conventions of film noir are once again transformed by the self-conscious deployment of the codes and conventions of the rape-revenge cycle. Thus while Bridget largely conforms to the description of the femme fatale outlined by Janey Place, she also departs from it in small, but significant details.<sup>40</sup> For example, unlike the femme fatale, whose weapon of choice is the gun which, according to Place, is the symbol of 'her "unnatural" phallic power', Bridget's is a can of mace (she attempts to defend herself from Harlan with it and she uses it to kill Clay).<sup>41</sup> Bridget's choice of weapon thus functions to situate the film within feminist discourses of violence against women, and to align Bridget with the female avenger of rape-revenge rather than with the femme fatale of film noir. In as much, it also suggests Bridget's power comes from feminism rather than from her appropriation of the phallus, and thus counters the widespread tendency to equate feminism with

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<sup>39</sup> Sylvia Harvey, 'Woman's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 22-34 (pp. 26-27).

<sup>40</sup> Janey Place, 'Women in Film Noir', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 35-67.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

masculinization. As I argued in chapter 1, this tendency is particularly apparent in Clover's work on the rape-revenge film. In many ways, however, *The Last Seduction* could be seen as simply confirming Clover's argument. Certainly, the cross-dressing motif is one that is continuous with certain films of the rape-revenge cycle. It is, moreover, one which, within the logic of the film's concern with transvestism, would appear to work to construct Bridget as a 'phallic woman'.

I think, however, that the self-consciousness I have identified in the film's deployment of social, political and cultural discourses, together with the playful way in which it engages with audience expectations, should alert us against assuming too conventional an understanding of this motif.<sup>42</sup> For example, in all other respects, the climactic scenes reverse the traditional expectations of the rape-revenge structure. Firstly, and on a very simple level, the rape is located at the end of the film rather than at the beginning. This, in turn, functions to reverse the conventional direction of the rape-revenge film's transformations. In other words, rather than moving from being feminized to being eroticized/masculinized, Bridget moves from being eroticized/masculinized to being feminized. This is made explicit in her taunt to Mike 'I'm Trish, rape me' (literally 'I'm a man, make me a woman'). Whilst the way in which Bridget asks to be raped here represents an apparently reactionary confirmation of the myth that women are 'asking for it', its deployment is, as always, heavily ironic (it is men who are shown to be the victims of such myths since by raping Bridget, Mike implicates himself in the murder of Clay). Moreover, in assuming Trish's identity and asking to be raped, Bridget also succeeds in symbolically displacing the traditional punishment of the femme fatale onto the

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<sup>42</sup> The knowingness with which the film deploys the discourses of popular psychoanalysis should, in particular, warn us against trying to produce literal psychoanalytic readings. See, for example, footnote 33.



film's other phallic woman (Trish). In this respect, Bridget's cross-dressing can be seen as an ironic comment on the widespread belief that a powerful and successful woman is also a masculinized one. Indeed, given the ineffectuality of the phallic objects (guns, knives) with which the men in the film arm themselves, the film can clearly be seen to construct a post-modern milieu in which, the phallus, once the transcendental signifier, has become unfixed from its formerly unrivalled association with power. In the film's final scenes, then, Bridget is shown to have shed the sexy but business-like clothes (stockings; short, fitted skirts; tailored trousers; shirts; waistcoats; jackets in black, white and grey) of the 'phallic' femme fatale/career woman. Instead she wears a long, figure-hugging dress, in soft, moss-coloured material, her make-up is softer and more muted and her hair less sleekly styled. In addition, whereas throughout the film, Bridget has been aggressively self-sufficient, here she allows her chauffeur to hold her umbrella and open doors for her, an indication both of Bridget's wealth and power and of her 'femininity'. Thus, contrary to Clover's arguments concerning the masculinization of the female avenger, but in line with the erosion of the distinction between feminism and femininity which the film articulates, *The Last Seduction's* narrative trajectory is *towards* femininity and its reconciliation with female power and feminism. Bridget, indeed, 'has it all'.

According to Mary Ann Doane:

The femme fatale is situated as evil and is frequently punished or killed.

Her textual eradication involves a desperate reassertion of control on the part of the threatened male subject. Hence, it would be a mistake to see



her as some kind of heroine of modernity. She is not the subject of feminism but a symptom of male fears about feminism.<sup>43</sup>

Bridget's triumph at the end of *The Last Seduction* would seem to counter the traditional understanding of film noir and, indeed, neo-noir, as representing a backlash against feminism. Does this mean, however, that she is therefore 'the subject of feminism'? And if she is, what version of feminism does her trajectory through the narrative articulate? In privileging the 'feminist' stories Bridget enunciates over film noir's traditional emphasis on the masculine story, *The Last Seduction* would certainly appear to situate Bridget as the 'subject of feminism'. However, as I have been arguing, alongside these 'feminist' stories the film also articulates a Reaganite story of success. Thus, as I have suggested, the film can be seen as co-opting 1970s feminist discourses around violence against women to the Reaganite yuppie ideology of the 1980s. In this sense, the film's project is similar to that of the cable TV channel, Lifetime, which Jane Feuer has argued 'rewrites 1970s feminism as 1980s female yuppiedom' for the 1990s.<sup>44</sup> The traffic between discourses, however, is not simply one-way. There is consequently a case to be made for arguing that while feminism is used to legitimate the politics of Reaganism, Reaganism also both enables and justifies 'feminist' ambition and will to power. Elizabeth Traube articulates some of these contradictions in her discussion of women and the American Dream. The figure of the 'nondomestic woman' she argues

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Feuer, 'Feminism on Lifetime: Yuppie TV for the Nineties', *Camera Obscura*, 33-34 (1997), 133-145 (p. 145).

has sources in the feminist movement and in the middle-class ideology of success through individual initiative, which liberal feminism helped to extend to women.

One result of that extension is that contemporary women may not need an ideological commitment to feminist politics to launch them on a nontraditional path. Both Gerson and Rosanna Hertz have shown how the pushes of economic need and domestic isolation or instability combine with the pulls of expanding workplace opportunities to draw middle- and upper-middle-class women into corporate and professional careers, which Hertz describes as “an intersection of feminism and the American dream”.<sup>45</sup>

This suggests, moreover, that the understanding of feminism the film produces is not one of backlash but one in which feminism is simultaneously invoked and suppressed. For example, as I have argued, the film depends on certain discourses of 70s feminism (particularly those around violence against women) at the same time as it disavows or critiques the identities (particularly that of the victim) these discourses construct for women. In this respect, I think the film’s critique of victim feminism must be read not as a backlash *against* feminism, but as a backlash *within* feminism. While feminists such as Imelda Whelehan have been, perhaps understandably, suspicious and critical of this backlash, arguing that it represents a form of ‘woman blaming’ which is fundamentally *anti*-feminist, I think such criticisms are, in fact, misguided.<sup>46</sup> In particular, they overlook the fact that it is not feminism *per se* that is

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to ‘Post-Feminism’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 216-237.



being rejected but certain aspects of 70s feminism that, in the words of Charlotte Brunsdon, are no longer 'adequate to the experience of young women growing up today'.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the version of feminism the film articulates is best understood as *post-70s* feminism rather than as anti-feminism. For example, the film's combination of a Reaganite success story and a feminist revenge story redefines the archetypal feminist notion of 'having it all' according to the exigencies of the present moment. In other words, while in traditional feminist discourse, 'having it all' more often than not meant giving things up (particularly heterosexual femininity as it is constructed through adornment and consumerism), the negotiations that occur between 70s feminism and the 80s culture of consumption in *The Last Seduction* suggest that it is now possible to 'have' *both* femininity *and* feminism. Furthermore, in depicting a woman who not only 'wants it all' and gets it, but who succeeds in reconciling the apparent contradictions (between feminism and femininity) which this brings, *The Last Seduction* can be seen as countering the backlash rhetoric which insisted that feminism's claim that women could 'have it all' had only succeeded in making them miserable. Of course, the understandings of feminism the film produces are not without their problems or detractors. For example, in an acerbic response to a recent American advertising campaign featuring real-life career women wearing smart business jackets on top, but nothing but Jockey's new range of hosiery below, Linda Grant accused the women who dress sexily in the workplace not of wanting it all, but of 'wanting it both ways'.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, like most Hollywood films, the politics *The Last Seduction* articulates are individual rather than collective while, as the conclusion of the film suggests, it is

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<sup>47</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 101.

<sup>48</sup> Linda Grant, 'I'm Sexy. So Promote Me', *Guardian* (G2), 23 June 1998, p. 6.



only those in positions of wealth and power that can afford to 'play at' being feminine. In this respect, the understandings of feminism the film produces are open to criticisms similar to those levelled at Naomi Wolf's 'power feminism' – as Julie Burchill recently argued: 'Though currently posing as a universal dilemma, to have or not to have it all is, in reality, an issue only affecting middle-class western women.'<sup>49</sup>

### OF VAMPS AND AVENGERS: *BATMAN RETURNS*

In her discussion of 'victim feminism versus power feminism', Naomi Wolf cites Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) in the film *Batman Returns* as an example of a 'power-feminist avenger'. According to Wolf, Catwoman's role as a power-feminist avenger becomes clear

in a scene when she saves a woman from rape, but as the woman meekly showers her rescuer with thanks, Catwoman looks her up and down with a mixture of pity and contempt and sneers, 'You make it so easy.'<sup>50</sup>

Whilst Catwoman is thus, unlike Bridget in *The Last Seduction*, much more clearly constructed in the tradition of the female avenger of violence against women of the rape-revenge cycle, she is also, according to Wolf, 'the masked avenger of the slights and humiliations of clerical work'.<sup>51</sup> This interpretation, however, is not entirely accurate. Rather, I want to argue that Catwoman is constructed as the avenger of capitalist excess and greed as it is embodied in the figure of Max Shreck (Christopher Walken). In other words, while in her guise as Selina Kyle, secretary to

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<sup>49</sup> Julie Burchill, 'To Have and Have Not', *Guardian* (Weekend), 14 March 1998, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 244.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 244.

Max Shreck, Catwoman is indeed humiliated and shown to be little more than a glorified waitress, it is her discovery of Shreck's capitalist excesses (the plans for the new power plant), rather than her humiliation, that lead to her 'death' and subsequent desire for revenge. Thus, whilst like *The Last Seduction*, *Batman Returns* combines the 80s success story with the rape-revenge story, the effects of this combination are somewhat different. The narrative trajectory, in other words, is not towards 'the unrestricted triumph of desire' but towards a more morally restrained and responsible capitalism.<sup>52</sup> Unlike the 80s success story, however, which, according to Traube, 'reintroduced the theme of moral discipline' by identifying 'the dangerous, uncontrolled forces loose in society with the independent, upper-middle-class, professional-managerial woman', *Batman Returns* identifies these 'uncontrolled forces' as masculine (Shreck) and the forces of 'moral discipline' as feminine (Catwoman).<sup>53</sup> Given the way in which, as Traube observes, 'moral influence had' since the nineteenth century 'appeared as a natural vocation of woman', this situation of Catwoman in the role of moral guardian (of capitalism) is almost as problematic as the success story's traditional demonization of women.<sup>54</sup> It is worth pointing out, however, that the film also explicitly, and rather playfully, sexualizes the theme of moral discipline by constructing Catwoman as a PVC-clad dominatrix complete with whip. It is perhaps significant, in this respect, then, that the film makes Catwoman's first act of revenge a specifically feminist one (saving a woman from rape) and only her second, an attack on capitalist excess as it is articulated through conspicuous consumption (blowing up Shreck's department store). From within the context of the

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143.



first act, the blowing up of the department store can be read both as a moral comment on the excesses of capitalism *and* as a feminist attack on the relegation of women to the role of consumers rather than producers within a capitalist economy. In other words, in constructing Catwoman first as a feminist and only second as the moral guardian of capitalism, the film co-opts a feminist critique of consumerism to the New Right's call, in the late 1980s, for a more morally restrained and responsible capitalism centred around family values.

That the film is not an attack on capitalism itself, but on capitalist excess is made clear by the two opposing versions of capitalism the film constructs: that of a responsible capitalism embodied in the figure of Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) and that of a corrupt capitalism personified in the figure of Max Shreck. Interestingly, both versions of capitalism can be understood through their relation to the motif of the vampire, a motif whose cultural currency and visibility in 1992 was assured by the release of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kuzui, 1992) and *Innocent Blood* (John Landis, 1992). Indeed, the emergence of the vampire story at key moments in the cultural and social history of the west suggests that, like Batman, the vampire represents a potent and enduring myth which can be mobilized in various ways to make sense of a changing social and political context.<sup>55</sup> My specific purpose here, then, is to trace how the combination of these myths in *Batman Returns* can be seen as an attempt to make sense of feminism within the wider political context of the 1990s.

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<sup>55</sup> *Batman* (Leslie Martinson, 1966), for example, can be seen as an attempt to work through and resolve anxieties about communism. Significantly, the threat of communism is largely articulated through the demonization of Catwoman, who disguises herself as Kitka, a Russian journalist from *The Moscow Bugle*. At the end of the film, of course, the threat is overcome through the punishment of Catwoman.



The influence of the vampire myth in *Batman Returns* is particularly apparent in the figure of Max Shreck who takes his name from the actor who played the vampire in the first film adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel (*Nosferatu*, F. W. Murnau, 1922). In as much, he is constructed as a contemporary vampire, a symbol of dangerous and excessive consumption, whose proposed power plant will suck not blood but power from Gotham City. Indeed, as Christopher Frayling has observed, one of the many ways of interpreting the vampire myth is as 'about a pathological form of consumerism'.<sup>56</sup> That Shreck represents a form of capitalism that has quite literally become monstrous and uncontrollable is made clear in his exchange with the Penguin (Danny DeVito). 'I'm a business man [...] but that does not make me a monster', Shreck tells the Penguin, as the latter nevertheless produces a whole series of evidence which, in fact, proves the connection. The power plant for Shreck is, moreover, like blood for the vampire, the route to a form of eternal life, as he tells Selina shortly before 'killing' her: 'This power plant is my legacy, it's what I leave behind, for Chip.'<sup>57</sup> Indeed, while Shreck actually 'kills' Selina by pushing her out of the window, as he closes in on her the film employs all the cinematic conventions traditionally used to represent the vampiric act. Framed in a close-up two-shot, Shreck moves towards Selina as if to kiss/bite her, his head inclined to one side, his lips parted and his eyes fixed on the point where her neck would be were it in frame. That the film is quite literally playing around with such conventions is, however, underlined when Shreck abruptly pulls back and pretends he was only joking.

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher Frayling, 'Dracula', in *The BFI Companion to Horror*, ed. by Kim Newman (London: BFI, 1996), pp. 98-99 (p. 98). The similarities between vampirism and capitalism have also been noted by Richard Dyer, 'Dracula and Desire', *Sight and Sound*, 3:1 (January 1993), 8-12 (p. 10), Ken Gelder, *Reading the Vampire* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 17 and Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs and David Miller, rev. edn. (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 90-98.

<sup>57</sup> This implication of the life-giving properties of electricity suggests an allusion to another gothic novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

Finally, Shreck is dressed according to the specifically cinematic tradition of the vampire as aristocrat. He wears white wing-collared shirts, bow ties, dark suits and his grey hair swept back off his face. In addition, in the final sequences, he wears a long black cape and, in fact, throughout he wears his coats 'cape-like' over his shoulders.

Bruce Wayne, however, also has associations with the vampire through his alter-ego, 'the caped-crusader', Batman. As Andrew Ross has observed, the bat totem was 'visually established in modern Euro-western cultural iconography as the vampiric defense of white, aristocratic blood'.<sup>58</sup> The origins of Bruce Wayne's vampiric vigilante alter-ego, however, stem not from the 'defense of white, aristocratic blood' but from the defence of property, as William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson explain:

His childhood trauma stemmed from an incident in which attempted resistance to a petty violation of property rights (the theft of a necklace) gave rise to a capital crime (murder). Bruce Wayne's father was willing to give his life to defend property and uphold the law. The son followed in his father's footsteps.<sup>59</sup>

Like Shreck, then, Bruce Wayne/Batman represents a contemporary capitalist articulation of the vampire myth. The myth as it is articulated through Bruce Wayne/Batman, however, places him at the opposite pole of the capitalist moral dichotomy to Shreck (who, at one point, describes Bruce Wayne as a 'trust-fund

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew Ross, 'Ballots, Bullets, or Batmen: Can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?', *Screen*, 21:1 (Spring 1990), 26-44 (p. 27).

<sup>59</sup> William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, "'I'm Not Fooled By That Cheap Disguise'", in *The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and his Media*, ed. by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (London: BFI, 1991), pp. 182-213 (p. 195).



goody-goody'). In other words, as Uricchio and Pearson have observed, Bruce Wayne/Batman's 'vast inheritance places him largely outside the constraints of capitalist accumulation' and this thus disassociates him from the capitalist excess personified by Shreck.<sup>60</sup> Instead, as Uricchio and Pearson argue, 'his inheritance and his obsession both stem from an attempt to defend property' and thus situate him not only as supportive of the capitalist economy, but as quite literally *conservative*.<sup>61</sup> As Bruce Wayne himself points out to Selina, Batman 'probably saved millions of dollars in property damage alone'.

How does Catwoman who, at first glance, would appear to owe more to the femme fatale of film noir and the female avenger of rape-revenge, function within this vampire economy? What I want to argue is that the femme fatale, the female avenger and the female vampire have more in common than might at first appear, and that it is in the combination and negotiation of these historically specific figurations of femininity that *Batman Returns* can be seen to be attempting to make sense of feminism past, present and future. I want to start by elucidating some fairly basic continuities between film noir and the gothic literary tradition out of which the vampire narrative emerged. The term 'film noir', for example, was derived from the term 'roman noir' used by French critics to describe the nineteenth century British gothic novel. The similarities between the gothic novel and film noir are, however, not simply semantic but extend right through to the form of the narrative which in both are frequently fragmentary and unstable. This lack of narrative coherence is, interestingly, also a feature of Burton's Batman films (a feature for which he has frequently been criticized). It is really not surprising, however, that Burton should

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 202

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203



adopt a Gothic mode of story-telling for a character whose origins so clearly lie in the Gothic world of vampires and whose home is none other than *Gotham City*.

Despite her widespread connection with the film noirs of the 1940s and 50s, the origins of the femme fatale can also be traced to an earlier historical period. As Mary Ann Doane has observed:

The femme fatale emerges as a central figure in the nineteenth century, in the texts of writers such as Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire and painters such as Gustave Moreau and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. [...] The femme fatale is a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century.<sup>62</sup>

Even more interesting, perhaps, is the fact that the inspiration for these representations came largely from the vampire stories that had circulated widely since the publication of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819. The evolution of the femme fatale can thus be traced to these stories and particularly to the French writers who, as Christopher Frayling, has argued:

transformed the vampire from melodramatic villain into a more personalised kind of sexy predator. Théophile Gautier's 'Clarimonde' (1836) has 'sea-green eyes and teeth of purest Orient pearl' with which she easily manages to seduce a young country priest; Charles

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<sup>62</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-2.

Baudelaire's 'woman with the strawberry mouth' (1857) sucks the pith  
from the bones of a young poet.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, as Sharon Russell has observed: 'The *femme fatale* leading men to their doom is entirely a sexual image deriving from the siren and the vampire.'<sup>64</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find that the decadent culture described by both Doane and Frayling was one in which Bram Stoker was deeply enmeshed, or that the figure of the active and erotic *femme fatale* can be perceived in *Dracula* in the form of the female vampire.<sup>65</sup> The *femme fatale* and the female vampire, moreover, are both figures who must be destroyed. This drive to punish or eradicate these dangerously active and sexual female figures has often been interpreted as a sign of the anti-feminist tendencies of the texts in which they appear. Certainly, Stoker's *Dracula* was, like the film noir cycle, produced at a time when women seemed to be threatening the established status-quo. The 1890s witnessed the rise of first-wave feminism and *Dracula* was, in fact, published in the same year (1897) that the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was formed. *Dracula*, then, like the film noir and rape-revenge cycles, has a particularly privileged relation to feminism. Like film noir and rape-revenge, however, I think it would be reductive to read *Dracula* simply as a backlash text. Rather, I think it represents an attempt to make sense of the spectre of the 'New Woman' and a gathering women's movement.<sup>66</sup> For example, although through the figure of Lucy, the female vampire, signs of (sexual)

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<sup>63</sup> Christopher Frayling, 'Vampirism (Before *Dracula*)', in *The BFI Companion to Horror*, ed. by Kim Newman (London: BFI, 1996), pp. 320-321 (p. 321).

<sup>64</sup> Sharon Russell, 'The Witch in Film: Myth and Reality', in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 113-125 (p. 115).

<sup>65</sup> 'Dracula', *The South Bank Show*, UK, LWT, tx. January 1993.

<sup>66</sup> For specific references to the 'New Woman' see Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 118-119.



emancipation associated with the New Woman are violently punished, in the figure of Mina, Stoker appears to have attempted to come to some form of compromise with emergent feminism. Thus, while Mina is to a certain extent represented as a passive victim, she also plays an active part in the ultimate destruction of Dracula. In as much, her characterization depends both on the Victorian ideal of compliant womanhood embodied in the 'Angel in the House' stereotype *and* on the feminist ideal of the assertive 'New Woman'. Van Helsing articulates this combination when he says: 'Ah, that wonderful madam Mina! She has man's brain – a brain that a man would have were he much gifted – and woman's heart.'<sup>67</sup>

Significantly, several commentators have elucidated the Dracula story's anti-feminist tendencies by suggesting that the staking of the female vampire represents a form of symbolic rape. Both Elaine Showalter and S. S. Prawer, for example, have described the staking of the female vampire as a form of 'gang-rape'.<sup>68</sup> Others have likened the vampiric act itself to rape. David Ehrenstein, for example, has argued that 'the spectacle of Dracula's conquests becomes a socially acceptable form of enjoying rape'.<sup>69</sup> Certainly there is much to recommend a reading of the vampiric act as a (violent) sexual act, not least because of the similarity between the vampire's bite and a kiss and the exchange of bodily fluids this accommodates.<sup>70</sup> More interesting

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<sup>67</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 302.

<sup>68</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 181.

S. S. Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 257.

<sup>69</sup> David Ehrenstein, 'One From the Art', *Film Comment*, 29:1 (Jan/Feb 1993), 27-30 (p. 29).

See also: Sharon Russell, 'The Witch in Film: Myth and Reality', in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 113-125 (p. 121).

Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Daughter's of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film', in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 153-163 (p. 156).

<sup>70</sup> For a more detailed exposition of the similarities between vampirism and sexual intercourse see: Richard Dyer, 'Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism', in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. by Susannah Radstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), pp. 47-72.



for my purposes, however, are the similarities between the effects of vampirism and the effects of rape on the representation and narrative trajectory of the woman in both the vampire story and the rape-revenge story. In other words, in both stories the effect of vampirism/rape is to bring about a transformation in the woman, a transformation which involves the movement from victim to female vampire/female avenger. This transformation, moreover, frequently involves the eroticization of the previously chaste or dowdy female victim. Eroticization is one of the key signifiers of the threat to patriarchy the female vampire/avenger represents. Firstly, it represents the liberation of female sexuality, a liberation which is threatening because it is no longer confined to providing sexual pleasure for the male. Rather, female sexuality becomes either a lure to trap and destroy the unsuspecting male or, because it has been 'liberated' from its association with marriage and heterosexual romance, exclusive or self-sufficient. The latter is particularly apparent in the lesbian vampire films of the post-1970 period, although it is also a feature of the rape-revenge film where the female avenger, despite her new found sexuality, rejects heterosexual romance. The final correlation between the female vampire and the female avenger requires little elaboration beyond citing Bonnie Zimmerman's observation that 'whether the woman vampire is lesbian or heterosexual, her real object of attack is always the male'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, whether the female vampire is a genuine vampire or a mortal vamp/femme fatale, such as those played by Theda Bara in the 1910s, her attacks on men can be read as acts of revenge. As Bara herself claimed: 'Women are my greatest fans because they see in my [role as] vampire the impersonal vengeance of all their unavenged wrongs ... I have the face of a vampire,

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<sup>71</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, 'Daughter's of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film', in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 153-163 (p. 160).

perhaps, but the heart of a feminist.’<sup>72</sup> These correlations between the vampire story and the rape-revenge story are, moreover, strikingly illustrated in *The Velvet Vampire* (Stephanie Rothman, 1971) in which, according to Zimmerman, ‘the vampire halts in her pursuit of the female victim to attack a rapist’.<sup>73</sup> Given these similarities, and the prominence of the female or lesbian vampire at key moments in the history of feminism (the 1890s and the 1970s), it is possible to argue that the female/lesbian vampire, like the female avenger of rape-revenge, represents one of the key female figures through which British and American culture has attempted to make sense of emergent feminism. Indeed, the recent surge of feminist interest in ‘vampy’ figures such as the contemporary femme fatale suggests that such figures might also represent a key site through which the *current* feminist moment can be understood.<sup>74</sup>

Despite their similarities, the vampire story and the rape-revenge story, nevertheless, diverge in two important ways. Firstly, the vampire story frequently shows women not only actively inviting the vampire’s attack but getting lascivious pleasure from it. Thus, ‘the spectacle of Dracula’s conquests’ is not only, as David Ehrenstein has argued, ‘a socially acceptable form of enjoying rape’, it is also a way of *making* rape socially acceptable by suggesting that women actually want and enjoy rape. The second way in which the vampire story and the rape-revenge story

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<sup>72</sup> Cited in Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 98.

<sup>73</sup> Bonnie Zimmerman, ‘Daughter’s of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film’, in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 153–163 (p. 155). While I have been unable to locate a copy of this film in order to check Zimmerman’s claim here, *Time Out Film Guide* also refers to this incident: ‘After casually sticking her stiletto into a potential rapist, Yarnall’s Diane Le Fanu (or should we call her Carmilla?) slinks into the Stoker Art Gallery and invites a young married couple [...] for the weekend to her isolated desert home’. Tom Milne, ed., *Time Out Film Guide*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 754.

<sup>74</sup> Camille Paglia, for example, claims that the vamp represents ‘the missing sexual personae of contemporary feminism’. Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Tramps: New Essays* (London: Viking, 1995), p. ix. The currency of such figures is also suggested by the fact that the seminal text on the femme fatale, *Women in Film Noir* (ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, London: BFI, 1978) is currently being revised and updated. For a more detailed discussion of feminist analyses of such figures, see chapter 1.



differ is in their ultimate treatment of their female characters. In other words, while both stories construct liberated and threatening female figures, in the vampire story that liberation must ultimately be destroyed through the staking of the female breast, through, in other words, enacting a form of symbolic rape which returns the woman to her original role of passive victim. In the rape-revenge story, however, there is no such return and the female figure thus remains outside of masculine control and authority as the active avenger of her own rape. The female avenger does, however, as I have already suggested, have another corollary in the vampire story. This comes in the form of the morally pure woman who is able to resist vampirism and thus helps to bring about the destruction of the male vampire. Yet, whilst like the female avenger, this figure often embodies some of the traits of the feminist 'New Woman', her moral purity and her role in destroying the threat to masculine sexuality and authority the vampire represents, ultimately differentiates her from the female avenger of rape-revenge. Furthermore, while the vampire narrative has traditionally split the roles of vamp and avenger (respectively Lucy and Mina in *Dracula*), the rape-revenge film combines them in the figure of the erotic female avenger. This combination thus necessitates a negotiation of both these roles. Given the way in which Catwoman is constructed as an erotic female avenger within a narrative that so explicitly borrows the iconography and conventions of the vampire story, she would appear to provide the ideal site through which to trace these negotiations and their consequences for feminism.

At the beginning of *Batman Returns* Selina is, like the heroines of both the vampire story and the rape-revenge story, desexualized. This is signalled in a range of ways. Her clothes are drab and dowdy, her hair is pulled back off her face, she has no husband and her relationships with men are, by her own admission, always



‘brief’. Camera work also functions to construct Selina as non-erotic object by always positioning her at the edges or background of the frame. Perhaps the most privileged signifier of her unattractiveness, however, is her glasses, according to Mary Ann Doane, ‘one of the most intense visual clichés of the cinema’, signifying amongst other things, ‘repressed sexuality’.<sup>75</sup> More than this, the woman who wears glasses, is constructed as the active bearer of the look rather than as an object to-be-looked-at. Both Doane and Linda Williams have argued that this reversal of the normal gendered relations of looking is so threatening to patriarchal society that it must ultimately be punished.<sup>76</sup> This is, of course, exactly what happens in *Batman Returns*. That is, Shreck pushes Selina out of the window because she has been prying into ‘protected files’ concerning his proposed power plant. Indeed, throughout this scene, Selina’s active look is emphasized not only by her glasses, but by the use of lighting to create angular shadows that give the impression that she is, in fact, wearing two pairs of glasses.

Naturally, by the time we see Selina falling to her ‘death’, the glasses have disappeared, never to be seen again. To all intents, then, Selina’s death marks her transformation from active bearer of the look to passive object to-be-looked-at (death being the ultimate state of passivity). Indeed, even after Selina has returned from the dead, her ‘death’ at the hands of the ‘vampire’, Shreck, is shown to have had the effect of eroticizing her and thus of re-positioning her as an object-to-be-looked-at.

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<sup>75</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator’, in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 41-57 (p. 50).

<sup>76</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator’, in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 41-57 (p. 50).

Linda Williams, ‘When the Woman Looks’, in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 83-99.

This transformation is signalled by changes in the visual treatment of both Selina and her new incarnation Catwoman. No longer situated in the background or at the margins of the frame, Selina/Catwoman moves to the centre, foreground of the frame. That she is now situated as an erotic spectacle is, moreover, evidenced by the frequency with which she is presented via various framing devices. In the first shot of her as Catwoman, for example, she is shown standing 'framed' in her window. More often, however, she is framed in the centre of the shot by two men standing at each edge of the shot with their backs to the camera looking at her (for example, in the scene with Bruce Wayne and Shreck at Shreck's office, in the scene with the two security guards in the department store, and in the scene outside the department store with Batman and the Penguin). However, if the woman as bearer of the look represents a threat to masculinity, so too does the woman as spectacle. Writing in the 1970s, Laura Mulvey claimed that:

[The woman] connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. [...] Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.<sup>77</sup>

Mulvey argues that the cinema nevertheless constructs two avenues of escape from this anxiety: voyeurism or fetishistic scopophilia. It is the latter which is most significant here. For Mulvey, fetishistic scopophilia involves 'complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure into a

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<sup>77</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 57-68 (p. 64).



fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous'.<sup>78</sup> With her spiked heels, whip and tight-fitting, PVC suit, Catwoman clearly represents the ultimate fetishist's fantasy, the phallic woman par excellence. The unreconstructed obviousness of this representation suggests, however, that *Batman Returns*, like *The Last Seduction*, is very knowing about the discourses of psychoanalysis. This is particularly apparent in an early scene where Selina listens to a message on her answering machine from her 'boyfriend'. Excusing himself from the weekend break they had planned together, he claims that 'Doctor Shaw says I need to be my own person and not an appendage'. Selina's reply – 'Some appendage. Guess I should have let him win that last racket ball game' – not only cements the sexual connotations of the term 'appendage', but playfully positions Selina as the castrating woman. Similarly, when Catwoman encounters the two security guards in Shreck's department store one says to the other 'I don't know whether to open fire or fall in love'. 'You poor guys, always confusing your pistols with your privates', Catwoman retorts sarcastically, as she nevertheless symbolically castrates them by whipping both their guns away. By thus mocking the understandings of masculinity psychoanalysis constructs and by showing men to be the ultimate victims of their own fetishistic fantasies, the film can clearly be seen to be poking fun at both psychoanalysis and masculinity. Within this context, the way in which Catwoman dominates the frame and dictates camera movement is suggestive not of her status as a passive object to-be-looked-at, but of her status as the active controller, if not of the look itself, at least of the effects of her own image.

If the film can therefore be seen to undermine its apparent construction of Catwoman as simply a passive fetish object, it can also be seen to challenge its initial punishment of the woman's active gaze. In other words, if Selina loses her glasses,

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 64.



she gains a symbolic pair in the form of her mask. Not only does this emphasize and frame her eyes, the very shape of the eye-holes represents a visual echo of the angular shadows her glasses cast in the scene described above. Indeed, the references to cats (particularly their 'curiosity') in this early scene serves to cement this interpretation by pre-figuring Selina's transformation into Catwoman. Batman's mask, on the other hand, almost totally obscures his eyes and thus his power to see. This ability to see or not is, of course, most clearly articulated through the totemic animals the two characters adopt. Cats, for example, are predators and thus have extremely acute vision, whereas bats are commonly (though incorrectly) associated with blindness (hence the popular expression 'blind as a bat').<sup>79</sup>

Catwoman's status as both an erotic object and as the active bearer of the look, signified through her elaborately made-up eyes, also align her with the femme fatale or vamp. As Linda Williams has remarked: 'The bold, smouldering dark eyes of the silent screen vamp offer an obvious example of a powerful female look.'<sup>80</sup> As I have already argued, however, the origins of the femme fatale, as Williams' use of the term 'vamp' here suggests, lie partly in the female vampire and, indeed, in the film's final sequences Catwoman is quite literally constructed as vampiric (although her remarkable recovery from certain death has, of course, already placed her within the ranks of the 'undead'). For example, when Shreck asks her what she wants, her reply is quite explicit: 'Your blood, Max.' Furthermore, whereas earlier at the ball, whilst dressed in what Christine Gledhill has identified as the conventional garb of the noir femme fatale (a 'long be-sequined sheath [dress]'), Selina had favoured the noir

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<sup>79</sup> See Ivor H. Evans, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 14<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Cassell Ltd, 1989), p. 124 for an explanation of this phrase.

<sup>80</sup> Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 83-99 (p. 85).

heroine's traditional weapon of choice (the gun), here she reverts to the vamp's original weapon, the kiss/bite ('How about a kiss Santy Claus').<sup>81</sup> This kiss/bite is, moreover, filmed using the standard cinematic conventions usually employed to represent the vampiric act. The extreme close-up from Shreck's point of view of Catwoman's face moving rapidly towards him, mouth open, teeth bared with a stun gun held up to her mouth is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Even the stun gun, not traditionally a weapon in the vampire's arsenal, is significant since it acts as a symbolic stand-in in the absence of real vampire fangs (it has two small, sharp points which, when held up to the mouth, are positioned where the vampire's incisors would be). Finally, Catwoman's 'nine-lives' means that, like the vampire, she is difficult to kill by conventional methods (here, a gun).

That Catwoman is not killed is, of course, crucial given that both the female vampire and the femme fatale are customarily punished, often violently. That Catwoman escapes such punishment is largely due to the fact that her vampiric act is also explicitly cast as an act of revenge, as her comment 'a die for a die' demonstrates. This comment thus functions to define Catwoman's revenge as specifically one of violence against women and to locate her within the tradition of the female avenger of rape-revenge. However, in carrying out her revenge Catwoman also succeeds in destroying the male vampire, Shreck, and the threat posed (particularly in the recessionary early 90s) by his immoral and irresponsible brand of 'consumer' capitalism. In this respect, the specific form Catwoman's revenge takes

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<sup>81</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Klute 1: A Contemporary Film Noir and Feminist Criticism', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 6-21 (p. 19). The continuities between the vampire story and the film noir story and their representations of women is suggested by the fact that in both the kiss is constructed as a deadly weapon. This is particularly apparent in the title of the noir thriller *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955). *Batman Returns*, moreover, makes allusions both to this film and to the potentially fatal consequences of the kiss through the repetition of the line 'A kiss can be so much deadlier if you mean it'.



(‘kissing’ Shreck whilst holding onto an exposed electric cable, thus killing him with the very electricity he had planned to suck, like blood, from Gotham City) is not only fitting but serves to point up the dual function of her revenge. The effect of this electrocution is, moreover, similar to the effect sunlight has on the vampire as described by Mina in *Dracula*: ‘the whole body crumbled into dust’.<sup>82</sup> Catwoman’s role as a ‘vampire slayer’ thus also aligns her with Mina in *Dracula*, who as Maurice Hindle has argued, ‘makes the final destruction of Dracula possible’.<sup>83</sup> I argued above that the characterization of Mina can be seen as Stoker’s attempt to come to some form of compromise with first-wave feminism by incorporating elements of both the Victorian ‘Angel in the House’ and the feminist ‘New Woman’ into her characterization. In casting Catwoman as both a female avenger and as the moral guardian of capitalism, I want to suggest that *Batman Returns* represents an attempt to reach a similar compromise between the demands of feminism and the increasing call in the 1990s for a return to more traditional models of gender (otherwise known as the backlash). That the kinds of models which those calling for such a return had in mind were, in fact, those established in the late nineteenth century became clear, in Britain at least, by the fact that their demands were often articulated through a call for a return to ‘Victorian values’.<sup>84</sup> These values, popularly believed to encompass the work ethic, thrift and puritanism, were seen as the remedy to the problems besetting capitalism in late 1980s and early 1990s. More importantly, ‘Victorian values’ invoked a model in which women’s roles in the capitalist economy were clearly defined and circumscribed, as Elizabeth Traube explains:

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<sup>82</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 484.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. viii.

<sup>84</sup> While, under John Major, the call for a return to ‘Victorian values’ was translated into a call to go ‘back to basics’, the ideology remained largely the same.



Known as the ideology of the separate spheres, this belief system arose with early capitalism and provided the framework for the emergence of the middle classes in Victorian England and America. Legitimation of the new bourgeois way of life involved a redefinition of women as domestic beings, with an innate capacity for nurturance that required proper cultivation. The virtuous woman improved herself through work; but whereas her industrious mate labored in the marketplace, she was uniquely qualified for work in the home, which came to be seen as woman's proper place or "sphere." Thus under the influence of the gender system, the split between home and workplace that capitalism imposed took on the appearance of a natural division, adjusted to fundamental differences between the sexes. Woman's role in this scheme was to stabilize society from within by exerting a moral influence on household members.<sup>85</sup>

The Victorian ideology of the separate spheres, in other words, cast women in the role of the moral guardians of capitalism. Given the appeals in the 1990s for a more morally restrained and responsible capitalism after the recklessness of the 1980s one can certainly see the attraction of such an ideology, not least because it was simultaneously able to articulate a subtle backlash against feminism by demanding women's restoration to the home in the interests of capitalism. As I have suggested, *Batman Returns'* specific articulation of the Victorian vampire narrative in many ways supports this ideology by situating Catwoman as the moral guardian of capitalism, protecting it from the immoral excesses of the vampire-consumer,

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 123-124.

Shreck. Indeed, in choosing a form of revenge which effectively robs Catwoman of one of her dwindling nine lives, the film also aligns her with Victorian notions of women as self-sacrificing martyrs (notions which are also significantly apparent at the end of *Nosferatu* where Mina sacrifices herself in order to destroy the vampire). However, in casting the forces of moral restraint and discipline in both sexual (Catwoman as dominatrix) and feminist (Catwoman as avenger of violence against women) terms, and in allowing Catwoman to survive, the film also manages to resist some of the more pernicious and insidious aspects of this ideology (not least the belief that ‘the only good feminist is a dead one’).<sup>86</sup> In particular, it refuses one of the central tenets of this ideology, the call for a return to family values, and it fails to resolve the threats to masculine power and authority the female vampire/avenger represents. In this respect, *Batman Returns* avoids the kind of recuperation of traditional gender roles that occurs in the final paragraph of *Dracula*, where Van Helsing’s description of Mina gradually slips from active ‘New Woman’ to nurturing mother to passive object of male protection:

‘This boy will some day know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care; later on he will understand how some men so loved her, that they did dare much for her sake.’<sup>87</sup>

In contrast, the end of *Batman Returns* has Bruce Wayne reduced to the role of ‘nurturer’ (of Catwoman’s cat), while Catwoman, perched on the rooftops above

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<sup>86</sup> Ironically, given the film’s attack on capitalist excess, the revelation that Catwoman has survived her confrontation with Shreck can be understood not only in terms of feminism, but in terms of the logic of the market place. Her survival, in other words, ensures her availability for potential sequels.

<sup>87</sup> Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 486.



Gotham City, not only dominates the film's final frame but appears to have quite literally toppled Batman from his position as the heroic vigilante protector of Gotham City. In other words, in the concluding shot of the prequel, *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), Batman is shown in an almost identical position to the one Catwoman occupies here, whilst below on the ground Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger) waits patiently for him in the car with Alfred. *Batman Returns*, however, reverses these spatial relations (here Bruce Wayne, patiently trawling the streets in the hope of finding Catwoman, occupies the same position as Vicki Vale). Thus, while the film does not exactly deconstruct the Victorian ideology of the separate spheres, it does invert it by positioning Batman within the traditionally feminine, private, domestic realm of heterosexual relations and Catwoman in the conventionally masculine, public, social space of action and heroism.<sup>88</sup> This is not to say, however, that Catwoman therefore simply becomes masculinized – as her construction here as the object of Batman's desire suggests, she remains throughout an eroticized figure. In this way, Catwoman can be seen as an articulation of one of the new 'public' femininities, described by Radner and discussed in chapter 1, which have emerged in response to women's movement out of the home in the twentieth century. Indeed, whereas Catwoman is never shown within the domestic space of the home after her initial transformation, Batman is frequently shown occupying this space *throughout* the film and, in fact, he is the only character who consistently does so. Thus, alongside the film's articulation and exploration of 'public' femininities, it is possible to discern an equivalent interest in articulating and exploring what might usefully be described as 'private' masculinities. What I want to suggest, therefore, is that the changing inscription of

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<sup>88</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here that the film's use of vertical space can be understood not only in terms of gender, but in terms of class. See Peter Wollen, 'Delirious Projections', *Sight and Sound*, 2:4 (August 1992), 24-27 (p. 26).



femininity and feminism in popular film cannot be fully understood without a companion understanding of the contemporary construction of masculinity and particularly the emergence of these 'private' masculinities.

I want to start, then, by suggesting that Andrew Ross's arguments concerning the superhero revival of the 1980s might need, in the context of the 1990s, some qualifications. Ross argues that:

The superhero revival was kindled by the desperate attempts, under Reagan, to reconstruct the institution of national heroism, more often than not in the form of white male rogue outlaws for whom the liberal solution of 'soft' state-regulated law enforcement was presented as having failed.

Under the cover of challenging the authority of official law enforcement, the new comics resurrect the practice of voluntarist law enforcement on the part of vigilantes at a time when the politics of the superhero tradition had long fallen into disfavour, and when advances in civil rights had stemmed the flow of 'white justice'.<sup>89</sup>

*Batman Returns*, however, refuses the logic of this nostalgic yearning for the heroic narratives of the past. Instead, it actually foregrounds the way in which heroism is often simply the construction of political publicity campaigns (for example, the Penguin's saving of the Mayor's baby is shown to be deliberately engineered in order to bolster the Penguin's own political ambitions). Simultaneously, Batman's status as a national hero is frequently questioned or undermined. Newspaper headlines, for

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<sup>89</sup> Andrew Ross, 'Ballots, Bullets, or Batmen: Can Cultural Studies Do the Right Thing?', *Screen*, 21:1 (Spring 1990), 26-44 (p. 33).

example, pronounce that 'Batman Blows It', while as Catwoman points out: 'It seems that every woman you try to save ends up dead or deeply resentful. Maybe you should retire.' Indeed, the most significant physical threats Batman faces come not from other men but from the vengeful Catwoman. Furthermore, Batman appears to have total faith in conventional law enforcement. For example, at the end of the film he tries to convince Catwoman to turn Shreck over to the police rather than dispense her own vigilante justice and, in response to her claim that 'the law doesn't apply to people like him or us', retorts 'Wrong, on both counts'. The last two observations suggest some interesting continuities with the transformations that occurred in the 1990s in the characterization of perhaps *the* archetypal 80s superhero, Arnold Schwarzenegger. As Susan Jeffords observes in relation to *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990), by the end of the film, Schwarzenegger

feels guilty when he punches an abusive father and promises from now on to use the law to get such men. His life is most threatened, not by another super-macho, special combat male enemy (like Mr. Joshua in *Lethal Weapon*), but by a determined mother who is out to revenge the death of her son.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, the 'hard body' which Jeffords has identified as characteristic of the male action hero of the 80s has, in *Batman Returns*, become, if not exactly a 'soft body', at least a penetrable one (Batman's suit, for example, is penetrated on more than one occasion by one of Catwoman's claws).<sup>91</sup> The emergence of a soft, penetrable body

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<sup>90</sup> Susan Jeffords, 'The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 196-208 (p. 199).

<sup>91</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994).



clearly keys into contemporary anxieties about AIDS and homosexuality, anxieties which the vampire myth is well-placed to articulate.<sup>92</sup> Jeffords, however, relates this shift in the representation of masculine identity 'from hard-bodied heroism to a manhood divided and troubled' both to Reagan's succession by Bush and to the increasing call for a replacement of the competitive, consumer-led values of the 80s with more morally restrained family values.<sup>93</sup> To take the former point first: Jefford's argues that while Bush was dependent on Reagan for his presidential nomination, 'in order to establish his own presidential image, Bush needed to differentiate himself from Reagan':

In doing so, he chose, from the day of his inauguration, to articulate that difference as one of "kindness" versus, by implication, meanness, of "gentleness" versus harshness. And by giving up Reagan's most cherished dream – Star Wars – Bush gave up as well any claim to toughness or vision.<sup>94</sup>

Bush thus rejected the Reaganite hard body, a body which, according to Jeffords, would increasingly 'come to seem not only tangential to the family but antithetical to it'.<sup>95</sup> In the 1990s, in other words, the 'external' hard-bodied masculinity of the 1980s was relegated in favour of a 'private' masculinity with more 'internal' concerns (health, emotions, families, homes). In *Batman Returns*, this shift from the politics of Reagan to those of Bush is particularly apparent in the Mayor's address to

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<sup>92</sup> For a more detailed exposition of the relationship between vampirism and homosexuality see: Richard Dyer, 'Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism', in *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. by Susannah Radstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), pp. 47-72.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 97.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100.



the citizens of Gotham City. Although he denounces the 'urban chaos' which is gripping the city, the Mayor does not call for a tough crackdown on criminal activity. Instead he makes an emotive appeal to the spirit of Christmas, a season which he suggests should 'be a time of healing'. This appeal is, moreover, firmly located within a discourse of family values since it is made not simply as an 'official', but as a 'husband and father'. Similarly, at the end of the film, Batman seems far more concerned with 'healing' his fractured identity through embracing the home and heterosexual relations than with dispensing tough vigilante justice (indeed, Batman's success in thwarting the Penguin's plan to kill the first-born sons and daughters of Gotham City specifically positions him in the role of the guardian of home and family).

What I want to suggest, then, is that the film traces the source of the crisis of masculinity that occurred in the 90s, in which masculine identity is divided and split between the hard body and family values, to the destruction of family life. Indeed, the film's concern with the effects of dysfunctional families is set up in its opening sequences, where we learn that the Penguin's fractured identity is a result of his abandonment as a child by his parents. Similarly, in the film's prequel, *Batman*, we discover that the development of Bruce Wayne's alter-ego, Batman, and his subsequent 'difficulty with duality', is the consequence of the murder of his parents when he was a child. Unlike many of the 'backlash' texts of the late 80s, however, the threat to the family here is located not in the figure of the independent woman, but in crime (Batman) and society's intolerance of difference (the Penguin). Yet, while Batman subsequently commits his life to fighting crime and the Penguin to gaining social acceptance, for both the ultimate route to resolving their identity crises is through heterosexual romance. Thus, for the Penguin, marriage to Catwoman not

only represents a way of completing his identity as Mayor of Gotham City but, as his reference to 'Beauty and the Beast' suggests, of making sense of both their identities and achieving some kind of (narrative) unity. Likewise, at the end of the film, Batman entreats Catwoman to abandon her plan to kill Shreck and come home with him, implying that since they are 'the same, split right down the centre' together they can find some kind of unity. Consequently, although the film does not explicitly blame the breakdown of the family and the crisis of masculine identity it has precipitated on the non-domestic woman, these narrative moves do implicitly suggest that the solution to this crisis lies in the reinstatement of the family as the primary institution through which conventional and stable gender identities are produced and secured. This becomes particularly clear in the Penguin's vision of his and Catwoman's future together, a future in which she would bring him his slippers and a dry martini, in which, in other words, she is cast firmly in the traditional nurturing feminine role. The trajectories of the male characters in *Batman Returns* are thus, to use Jameson's terms 'nostalgic', representing a yearning for the narrative certainties and stable and unified gender identities of the past.

The film, however, does not follow through on these nostalgic impulses and, in fact, on a least one occasion shows that men's failure to 'move with the times', especially with regard to women's changing status and demands, is the ultimate source of their downfall. For example, at the end of the film, Shreck attempts to deflect Catwoman's murderous advances by offering her 'jewels' in return for his life. The offer is clearly inspired by Catwoman's pre-second-wave feminist incarnation as a jewel thief and has a two-fold purpose. On the one hand, it serves to point up the movement of Catwoman from a figure defined by the trappings of femininity (jewels) to one defined by feminism (the avenger of violence against



women). On the other hand, it points up the (fatal) consequences of nostalgia, articulated here through Shreck's ignorance of these changes. Given that nostalgia is a central precept of the backlash against feminism, *Batman Returns*' critique of nostalgia would seem to offer a challenge both to backlash politics and to Jameson's understanding of post-modern culture. Indeed, Jameson's somewhat androcentric perspective causes him to overlook the way in which the figuration of the female protagonist frequently works to disrupt such nostalgic impulses. In particular, her rejection of traditional heterosexual romance tends to undermine any attempt to resolve the fracturing of both narrative and identity through a resolution based on such conventions. Indeed, Catwoman openly mocks the convention of the romantic narrative resolution, whilst implicitly linking problems of narrative with problems of identity: 'Bruce, I would love to live with you in your castle forever, just like in a fairy-tale. I just couldn't live with myself, so don't pretend this is a happy ending.' In rejecting a narrative resolution based on the conventions of heterosexual romance and family, Catwoman thus also rejects the discourses and structures through which traditional feminine identities are reproduced and secured. Instead, it is revenge which not only forms the narrative conclusion of the film, but which represents the route through which the female protagonist finds meaning. The question that remains, however, is what version of female identity does this produce and what are its consequences for feminism?

I want to begin to address this question via a brief analysis of the end of *Showgirls*, since the triteness with which the conventions of the rape-revenge cycle are exploited here is revealing. The film concludes with Nomi (Elizabeth Berkley) hitchhiking out of Las Vegas after having violently attacked her best friend's rapist. Having been picked up, she is asked if she gambled: 'What did you win?', 'Me' she replies. This



deployment of the rape-revenge structure thus allows the film to insert a 'feminist' narrative of self-discovery into a narrative about the erotic display of female bodies. Consequently, the film simply replaces the notion of a commodified self it has relied on throughout with a notion of an authentic self, whilst failing to question either notions. In contrast, by giving its central female protagonist a dual identity as Selina Kyle and Catwoman, *Batman Returns* is able to pose some rather more complex questions about constructed and authentic female identities. Furthermore, the film's reliance on both the pre-second-wave feminist representations of the vampire and film noir cycles and the 'feminist' representations of the rape-revenge cycle allows it to explore a whole range of feminine and feminist identities and the connections between them. It is in the character of Selina Kyle that the problems of contemporary feminism are most clearly articulated. At the beginning of the film Selina is represented as a dowdy and downtrodden secretary. Whilst her status as a single, working girl, combined with her obvious desire to further her career, suggests that she is, in part at least, a *product* of feminism, I would argue that she is set up as such in order that she can be shown ultimately to be a *victim* of feminism. In other words, her independence and career are not shown to have brought her happiness or fulfilment. Rather, in the 'words' of her cat she is 'pathetic' whilst in terms of backlash rhetoric she is 'terminally single' (there are repeated references to the absence of men in her life). Somewhat contradictorily, however, the film also relies on the discourses of 'victim' feminism, constructing a world in which women are the victims of sexism, inequality and male violence. It is one of these acts of violence that brings about Selina's transformation into Catwoman.

As I have been arguing throughout, the characterization of Catwoman is clearly based on both the literal female vampire and the metaphoric vamp or femme fatale.<sup>96</sup> As I have suggested, however, Catwoman, is also clearly inspired by the female avengers of the rape-revenge cycle. For example, her first act as Catwoman is to violently attack a man who is attempting to rape a young woman and, in fact, all her subsequent acts of violence can be read as acts of revenge against men who have committed violence against her.<sup>97</sup> More importantly, as a female avenger, Catwoman is posited as specifically the creation of second-wave feminism. This connection is most apparent in her parting comment to the woman she saved from rape: 'I am Catwoman, hear me roar.' The phrase is 'borrowed' (with obvious modifications) from Helen Reddy's 1972 number one record 'I Am Woman' which became one of the anthems of the American Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s. In addition, despite her part in the plan to kidnap the Ice Princess, Catwoman displays a solidarity with other women that clearly comes from feminism. Bonding between women is, for example, suggested through references to 'girl talk', by the fact that Catwoman lets the Ice Princess go and by Catwoman's anger on discovering that the Penguin has killed the Ice Princess. Finally, the last line of the film, spoken by Bruce Wayne, implicitly locates the film itself, and Catwoman in particular, within liberal feminist discourses of equality: 'Merry Christmas, Alfred. Goodwill to all men ... and women.'<sup>98</sup>

Given that she is the only other significant female character in the film, the Ice Princess also functions as the model of feminine identity against which Catwoman is

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<sup>96</sup> Hereafter, I shall use only the term 'vamp' as, unlike the term 'femme fatale', it is able to encompass the construction of Catwoman as *both* femme fatale *and* female vampire.

<sup>97</sup> In this respect, the film replaces rape with a more generalized violence against women.

<sup>98</sup> That the Penguin plans to 'punish all God's children [...] male *and* female' on the basis that 'the sexes are equal' suggests, however, that equality is not without its drawbacks.



defined. What is particularly interesting in this respect, is that in constructing the Ice Princess as a beauty queen and in contrasting Catwoman with her, the film recalls the antipathy to traditional constructions of heterosexual femininity which has come to typify second-wave feminism. In particular, it recalls the first widely publicized expression of such antipathy, the feminist demonstration at the Miss America contest in 1968. This functioned to establish a popular distinction between a constructed female identity and an authentic feminist identity, in which the former took on a set of characteristics which the latter defined themselves against, which has endured ever since. Thus women were stupid, childish and feminine whilst feminists were intellectual, serious and dowdy. In the contrasts it draws between Catwoman and the Ice Princess, however, *Batman Returns* attempts to undo this opposition. In other words, while it does not really challenge the construction of the beauty queen as stupid, childish and feminine, in its construction of Catwoman as witty, sophisticated and sexy it does posit an alternative set of contrasting 'feminist' characteristics.

What this begins to suggest is that the film's conflation of two historically specific representations of women, the vamp and the avenger, in the figure of Catwoman might have some interesting implications for feminism. Before speculating on these implications, however, I want to explore the effects of this conflation further. On one hand, it would seem that the conventions of the rape-revenge cycle function to undermine the misogyny associated with the representation of the vamp as evil incarnate. In other words, whilst both the vamp and the female avenger represent a threat to patriarchal society, the rape-revenge cycle gives the vamp the justifiable motive and feminist credentials her earlier incarnations lacked. The representation of Catwoman could thus be said to militate against the backlash against women it has



often been argued representations of the vamp articulate.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, as a highly attractive and sexual figure, the vamp serves to temper the connotations of ‘unfemininity’ associated with both revenge and feminism.<sup>100</sup> Whilst it could, of course, be argued that the latter merely functions to construct Catwoman as an erotic spectacle for the male members of the audience, the image of the woman displayed for the erotic contemplation of the male is, as I have argued above, not without its dangers, particularly when it is combined with an active female gaze. Furthermore, as I have suggested elsewhere, sexiness is not necessarily inimical to feminism, particularly when it is so clearly to the benefit of women and the detriment of men. Indeed, given that Catwoman continually rejects the offers of heterosexual romance her new incarnation inspires, what would actually appear to be at stake here is a self-sufficient female sexuality. As Naomi Wolf has observed, Catwoman’s suit is ‘a second skin that cannot be raped, a manifestation of women’s longing to be absolutely sexual but absolutely inviolable’.<sup>101</sup> Of course, the inviolability of Catwoman’s suit and her rejection of heterosexual romance can also be understood in terms of contemporary anxieties about AIDS. However, the changes the disease has brought about in sexual practices (the emphasis on auto-eroticism and non-penetrative intercourse) clearly line up with feminism’s demands for more of an emphasis on female sexual pleasure – as Catwoman purrs contentedly after her transformation: ‘I don’t know about you Miss Kitty, but I feel so much yummier.’

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<sup>99</sup> See, for example, my arguments above and E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1978).

<sup>100</sup> It also answers the criticism often levelled at the action heroine (particularly Thelma and Louise) that she simply sheds her traditionally feminine characteristics for traditionally masculine characteristics and is thus not a genuine challenge to conventional understandings of gender roles.

<sup>101</sup> Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 244.

If the changing shape and status of heterosexual femininity Catwoman's transformation articulates owes something to both feminism and AIDS, it also owes something to punk which, as Dick Hebdige has observed, also borrowed 'the illicit iconography of sexual fetishism'.<sup>102</sup> Thus, like the subcultural bricoleur who changes the meaning of signs by reinserting them into a different context, the representation of Catwoman recontextualizes the identities of the vamp and avenger according to the exigencies of the present moment. Indeed, if the female punk did semantic violence to the traditional signifiers of feminine identity (for example, by wearing garish make-up and tampons as earrings), then Catwoman does literal violence to these signifiers. On returning home after having been pushed out of the window by Shreck and brought back to life by an army of alley cats, Selina/Catwoman starts to destroy her apartment. She takes a knife to her cuddly toys (before pushing them down the waste disposal) and a can of black spray paint to her pink walls and clothes. She also spray paints her doll's house – one of the primary means by which young girls are initiated into the feminine role of wife and mother. In addition, the neon sign reading 'Hello There', a substitute for her non-existent husband, is broken so that it instead bears a telling indictment of the 'feminine' space of the home – 'Hell Here'. Indeed, Catwoman's rejection of a feminine identity based on home and family is foregrounded later when the Penguin speaks of the transformation of 'happy homemakers into Catwoman'. Finally, Catwoman blows up Shreck's department store, the sole retailer of 'Gotham Lady Perfume' (designed 'to make women feel like

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<sup>102</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 107-108. Moreover, one of the two songs used in the film is by archetypal female-led punk band, Siouxsie and the Banshees. The band went on to become the icons of the gothic youth culture of the early 1980s which, significantly, explicitly borrowed the iconography of the vampire (black clothes, crucifixes, white foundation and red or black lipstick).



women') and in so doing destroys one of the primary means through which feminine identity is constructed – consumerism.<sup>103</sup>

In its place, the film posits an alternative model of consumption and identity formation – bricolage. Thus, Catwoman's suit is 'recycled' from a plastic rain coat and other bits and pieces, while the stitches that hold it together form an irregular 'patchwork' pattern suggesting, as I have above, that Selina's current identity is, like the punk's, constructed from the recycled fragments of past ones.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, like the punk's outfits, Catwoman's suit foregrounds the signs of its own fabrication. In other words, the viewer is not only party to its construction but, as with the punk's use of safety pins, is constantly reminded of this by the visible white stitches that hold it together and by the fact that Catwoman is continually losing her 'claws'. This is not to say, however, that Selina Kyle somehow represents, in the words of Catwoman, 'the ['real'] woman behind the cat'. Rather, although the film is at pains to constantly remind us of Selina's dual identity (she and Bruce, for example, discuss the inaccuracies of the media construction of their alter-egos), these two identities become more and more blurred as the film progresses. Such double-coded identities function, in part, to signal the artificiality of identity. For example, towards the end of the film Bruce and Selina attend a masked ball where they are the only people without masks, thus suggesting that their 'real' identities are *themselves* disguises which are, in fact, no more 'authentic' than those of their mythic alter-egos. In the film's closing scenes these identities increasingly begin to slide into one another as

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<sup>103</sup> It is perhaps also worth noting in this respect that the point at which Selina begins the destruction described above and her transformation into Catwoman is also the point at which she hears the 'Gotham Lady Perfume' message on her answering machine. What is not clear, however, is whether it is the feminine stereotypes or the references to 'your boss' in the message that tip her over the edge.

<sup>104</sup> As Dick Hebdige has argued, punk recycled 'the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in "cut up" form'. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 26.



Catwoman, looking more and more dishevelled, prepares to exact her revenge on Shreck. Thus when Catwoman removes her mask during the final showdown it is to reveal that the identity of 'the woman behind the cat' is not singular or authentic but a complex amalgam of contradictory identities including: the working girl ('Selina Kyle, you're fired!'), the object of male desire, the victim of male violence ('You killed me, Batman killed me, the Penguin killed me'), the feminist avenger ('A die for a die') and the good girl ('All good girls go to heaven'). Consequently, whereas in *Showgirls*, revenge functioned as the means by which Nomi found herself, in *Batman Returns* it is the means through which Selina finds herself.

If, as Imelda Whelehan argues, feminism is currently undergoing an 'identity crisis' this is perhaps because of the impossibility of maintaining, in a post-modern society where the notion of stable, discreet, unified identities has collapsed, the distinction between constructed feminine identities and authentic feminist identities on which early second-wave feminism depended.<sup>105</sup> As I hope to have shown, the trajectory of Selina/Catwoman through the narrative of *Batman Returns* signals the erosion of this distinction and thus marks a break with the discourses of early second-wave feminism. In this sense, the film can be seen not only as post-modern, but also as post-feminist. The film, however, offers two versions of this highly contested term and the identities associated with it. In the first version, post-feminist identity is understood in terms of a backlash politics which constructs contemporary women as depressed and dowdy, 'terminally' single career woman, as, in other words, *victims* of feminism. In the second version, post-feminist identity is, as I have suggested above, marked by the erosion of an absolute distinction between feminine

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<sup>105</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 216.

and feminist identities. Thus, as we have seen, while the characterization of Selina/Catwoman clearly owes something to the pre-second-wave feminist representations of the vampire and film noir cycles and the hyper-feminine and sexualized representation of the vamp, it is also indebted to second-wave feminism, particularly as it has been articulated through the narratives of the rape-revenge cycle and the representation of the female avenger. In recycling these representations, the film neither wholly accepts or wholly rejects the versions of femininity or feminism associated with each, but instead attempts to renegotiate the meaning of these terms and the relationship between them. Inasmuch, *Batman Returns* rejects any simple elision of post-feminism with either pre-feminism (in which women are seen as the victims of *femininity*) or with backlash politics (in which women are seen as the victims of *feminism*). Indeed, if feminism is currently undergoing an 'identity crisis' it is perhaps merely a reflection of a new generation of young women's profound ambivalence towards both traditional feminist and feminine identities, an ambivalence which I think the figure of Catwoman articulates. In this respect, despite her affiliations with the vamp and the female avenger of rape-revenge, Catwoman is a profoundly contemporary figure. As such, she suggests that the future of feminism might lie, not in a nostalgic yearning for the certainties of the past (this, after all, is the territory of the backlash), but in its ability to renegotiate those certainties.



## CHAPTER 7

### FROM FEMINISM TO FAMILY VALUES: THE MATERNAL AVENGER

In the previous chapter, I argued that in the 1990s the rape-revenge structure became increasingly subject to post-modern articulations, and I attempted to trace the way in which these articulations of the structure represented an attempt to make sense of feminism from within the contemporary political context. I was particularly concerned here to demonstrate how post-modernism, frequently charged with being uncritically nostalgic, actually succeeded in offering a challenge to dominant understandings of the 1990s as a period of backlash against feminism. Rather than pressing for a return to a pre-feminist past, I suggested that these films reconstitute the past (both filmic and feminist), giving it inflections specific to the contemporary moment. While this often meant that feminism was co-opted to dominant political ideologies and thus robbed of its oppositional stance, it also meant that feminism was given a legitimacy and therefore a popular appeal it had previously lacked.

Consequently, far from suggesting that feminism was undergoing a wholesale *rejection* in the early 1990s, these films instead suggested that feminism was undergoing a process of *negotiation*. Against the tendency to equate post-feminism with backlash, then, I would argue that we need to make proper distinctions between these two terms. In other words, as the 'back' of backlash suggests, backlash politics are driven by nostalgia and the desire to return to an idealized past. Inasmuch, the backlash attempts to reject or circumvent feminism and is therefore more accurately described as pre-feminist rather than post-feminist. The term post-feminism, on the other hand, is more contradictory since written into the term is *both* an acknowledgement *and* a disavowal of a feminist past. Post-feminism should thus be understood not simply as a rejection of feminism, but as an attempt to reconcile or



negotiate the contradictions of the contemporary feminist moment in which feminism is being simultaneously appropriated and rejected, popularized and subject to a backlash.

This is not then to deny the existence of a backlash against feminism, but to suggest that the backlash was simply one way of making sense of feminism in the 1990s. It is to deny, however, that the backlash represented an attack feminism in its entirety (to claim as much would be to attribute to feminism a unity and a coherence it has never possessed). Instead, the backlash targeted those aspects of feminism which represented most of a threat to the health of the contemporary body politic: feminism's critique of the family, and motherhood in particular. Thus perhaps *the* seminal backlash text of the period, *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) makes its villainess the single, independent woman threatening the sanctity of the nuclear family and its heroine the good wife and mother. Because the heroine of the female rape-revenge narrative, however, is precisely the single, independent and self-sufficient woman the backlash text villainizes, these films, with their implicit rejection of heterosexual romance and family, would appear to be largely unamenable to the articulation of a backlash politics. The late 1980s and early 1990s (a period coincident with the emergence of the backlash), nevertheless saw the decline of conventional articulations of the female rape-revenge structure. In the previous chapter I analysed one of the forms the structure has since taken. These post-modern articulations of the rape-revenge structure have been accompanied, however, by an increase in two further types of rape-revenge: legal (*The Accused*, 1988; *Shame*, Steve Jodrell, 1988; *Without Her Consent*, Sandor Stern, 1989; *She Said No*, John Patterson, 1990) and parental (*In My Daughter's Name*, 1992; *Eye for an Eye*, 1995; *A Time to Kill*, 1996). What I want to argue is that these films not only

represent an attempt to contain the feminist politics of the rape-revenge narrative but, in the case of the maternal rape-revenge film at least, can also be seen to articulate a backlash politics.

Legal rape-revenge films not only represent a turning away from violent solutions but explicitly address the futility of such solutions. For example, in *Shame* Asta teaches Lizzie how to defend herself against a potential attacker, but is unable to answer Lizzie's question 'What if there's five of them?' and, in *The Accused*, Sarah comes off worst in her vehicular confrontation with one of the men who watched her being raped. *She Said No*, on the other hand, whilst similarly suggesting the inherently self-destructive nature of such solutions also marks them out precisely as fantasies. Here, the victim, Elizabeth, dreams that she shoots her rapist and then, in an interesting twist on the female rape-revenge structure, turns the gun on herself. Thus such films, whilst critiquing legal institutions and particularly rape laws which entail putting the victim on trial (both *The Accused* and *She Said No* feature unsuccessful criminal trials of the rapist(s)), ultimately show the legal system working in the victim's favour (in *The Accused* the spectators to the rape are found guilty of 'criminal solicitation' and in *She Said No* the victim brings a successful civil prosecution against her rapist). What is more, with the exception of a handful of films (*Positive ID*, Andy Anderson, 1987; *Thelma and Louise*, 1991; *Dirty Weekend*, 1992), subsequent articulations of the *female* rape-revenge structure attempt to circumvent the problem of its female avenger's evasion of the law either by situating her as an agent of that law (*Settle the Score*, Edwin Sherin, 1989; *Blue Steel*, 1990) or by making her subject to that law (*Mortal Thoughts*, Alan Rudolph, 1991; *The Rape*



of *Dr. Willis*, Lou Antonio, 1992).<sup>1</sup> The latter two films also render the female avenger 'safe' by casting her revenge as 'displaced' (self-defence/secondary in *Mortal Thoughts* and non-deliberate in *The Rape of Dr. Willis*).

Parental rape-revenge films, however, would seem to reverse this movement towards upholding legal solutions. In other words, in all three films the legal system is shown to be unable to adequately punish the perpetrators of rape. The rapist in *In My Daughter's Name*, for example, pleads temporary insanity and serves only a short time in a psychiatric institution while, in *Eye for an Eye*, the rapist is released on a technicality. Finally, in *A Time to Kill* the victim's father, correctly, it is suggested, believing that a racist legal system is unlikely to convict the white rapists of his black daughter, kills the men on their way to the preliminary hearing. The failings of the legal system also drive the mothers in the previous two films to take the law into their own hands and kill their daughter's rapists. Thus far, therefore, despite the secondary nature of the revenge, these films are remarkably similar to conventional articulations of the female rape-revenge structure, particularly those such as *Handgun* and *Extremities* in which the victims resort to violent solutions *after* the law has failed them. The essential difference, however, lies in the fact that, whereas in female victim-centred deployments of the structure, the legal ramifications of violent revenge are rarely, if ever, explored, tending to suggest that the female avenger has escaped legal retribution, in the parental-centred deployments of the structure, the parental avenger either does not attempt to escape legal retribution and is tried for their crime (for example, *In My Daughter's Name*) or the legal system is shown working in the victim's favour (for example, *Eye for an Eye* in which the

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<sup>1</sup> *Thelma and Louise* might also be included in this latter category since although its heroines evade the law, they do so only through death. Their evasion of the law can thus be read as, in fact, equivalent to a form of symbolic containment.



mother lures her daughter's rapist to her home and therefore shoots him legitimately in a 'breaking and entering' situation and *A Time to Kill* in which the father is found not guilty by reason of insanity). Consequently, whilst apparently critiquing legal institutions, these films also represent their parental avengers as willing to succumb to or act within that same legal system and, moreover, show that system to be fair. As the mother in *In My Daughter's Name* argues: 'I took the law into my own hands. I'm willing to pay the price.' Thus, despite the different ways in which revenge is achieved in the legal and parental rape-revenge film, both follow similar narrative trajectories in which, after initial criticism, the legal system is succumbed to and upheld. Given these similarities in the representation of the law, I want to focus my attention on the latter group of films since they provide an additional dimension absent in both the female and legal rape-revenge films which is particularly pertinent to a discussion of feminism in the 1990s: the representation of the family and especially the mother. For this reason, I will be focusing on the maternal avengers of *Eye for an Eye* and *In My Daughter's Name* rather than on the paternal avenger of *A Time to Kill*.

### THE MATERNAL AVENGER AND THE VIGILANTE-MOM MADE-FOR-TV FILM

What is particularly striking about *both* sets of films is that out of the seven I have referenced, three (spanning both groups) are made-for-television movies (*Without Her Consent*, *She Said No* and *In My Daughter's Name*). According to Jane Feuer such made-for-television movies are known in the trade as 'trauma dramas'.<sup>2</sup> In an excellent structural analysis of the trauma drama, Feuer identifies an eight step plot structure and thus an ideological impetus common to this group of films. In

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995).

particular, she argues that they represent an articulation of the ‘massive loss of faith by individuals in institutions’ such as the judicial system which occurred during the 1980s, and that they function to resolve ‘the traumas of the American family in a rejuvenation of public institutions by the people’.<sup>3</sup> As Feuer observes, the latter was ‘the same promise that got Reagan elected’, and she thus argues that while these films ‘invoked a long tradition of American populism, [they] gave it an inflection that was specific to the Reagan agenda’.<sup>4</sup> She also suggests, however, that ‘the new populism as embodied in these films is not unambiguously right wing in sentiment’.<sup>5</sup> In other words, she argues that despite their critique of liberal institutions, their calls for the restoration of the old-fashioned family (which these institutions were thought to threaten), and their emphasis on individual rather than collective social action, these films’ optimistic endings were not wholly believable and often left a sense of ‘the fragility of the average American family’.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in a footnote, Feuer suggests that ‘in the nineties, the pendulum appears to be swinging back, *especially when the trauma concerns women’s issues*’.<sup>7</sup> While Feuer’s argument is thus useful for the detailed way in which it elucidates how popular film articulated a Reaganite vigilante agenda, her exploration of the relationship between this agenda and feminism remains underdeveloped. In particular, her claim that trauma dramas which deal with women’s issues are, at the very least, ambiguous because ‘feminist/women’s issues [are] not amenable to placement on the usual left-right political spectrum’ betrays a belief that feminism somehow exists *outside* of history, politics and culture.<sup>8</sup> As I

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42n14 (my emphasis).

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37.



argued in chapter 4, however, feminism is shaped both *in response to* and *by* current political ideologies, whilst in the sphere of popular culture and media, as well as politics, feminism, like populism, can be mobilized and appropriated for both left and right-wing aims (the anti-pornography campaigns of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, for example, can be seen as reinforcing conservative morality).

With this in mind, I want to explore what happens to the feminist stories the rape-revenge structure can be seen to articulate when it meets the vigilante and familial politics of the trauma drama in the maternal rape-revenge film of the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> While this will involve an analysis of the extent to which these films conform to, or depart from, the structure of the trauma drama, it will also involve a look back to the trauma drama's generic antecedents in melodrama. As a form, melodrama has always lent itself to the articulation of a vigilante politics. David Grimsted gives a particularly interesting account of this relationship and its influence on contemporary politics in his discussion of the vigilante chronicles of the mid-nineteenth century United States. Here he argues that 'to look at the rhetoric, structure and argument of these tales is to encounter melodramatic politics in its most theatrical guise, and to gain some clues about melodrama's more disguised role in comparatively everyday politics'.<sup>10</sup> Central to both the theatrical and the political melodrama, for example, is the rhetoric of the Eden myth which, according to Grimsted

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<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out that, of the two films I intend to discuss here (*In My Daughter's Name* and *Eye for an Eye*), only one (*In My Daughter's Name*) is a TV movie. However, in terms of plot, structure and ideology the two films are remarkably similar and, in fact, *Eye for an Eye* conforms more closely to the structure of the made-for-TV trauma drama than *In My Daughter's Name*.

<sup>10</sup> David Grimsted, 'Vigilante Chronicle: The Politics of Melodrama Brought to Life', in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), pp. 199-213 (p. 199).



is fitted to a politics characterised by a sense of deep moral decay that craves correction by expulsion or extermination of all evil. In Attakapas, crime, relaxation of customs, the weakening of religious beliefs, and above all 'venality, cowardice, and the impotency of justice, that triple leper', had leached society of all decency until the pure finally recognised that 'the time has come when all the nations who do not wish to die must prepare by a struggle the heroic remedies that will cure them'. What is haunting about this melodramatic rhetoric is how recently one has heard it from the mouths of Ronald Reagan, Jerry Brown, David Duke and H. Ross Perot who promise escape from black decay to daybreak so long as the virtuous follow them in crushing evil empires, evil politicians and all the evil people who resist their march to the millennium.<sup>11</sup>

Feuer also traces the origins of the trauma drama's vigilante politics to melodrama, although her argument is somewhat different from Grimsted's in the emphasis it places on melodrama's relationship to 'women's issues', especially those concerning the family and motherhood. Noting both the gendered division of labour between mothers and fathers in these films, together with their largely female audience, she suggests that:

Perhaps these vigilante-mom made-for-TV films appealed to the same impulses as a right-wing feminism in support of the family. In this sense, they could be considered "women's pictures" or even politicized

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205.

melodramas. They delineate those forms of political activism possible for ordinary women during the Reagan years.<sup>12</sup>

Feuer, however, also draws a distinction between the 'politicized' melodrama of the trauma drama and the pure or domestic melodrama of other 1980s made-for-TV movies. According to Feuer, the pure or domestic melodrama is, like the trauma drama, characterized by 'the crisis of the individual family' but, unlike the trauma drama, it offers 'no public solution' to this crisis.<sup>13</sup> In these films, then, functions 3-7 of the trauma drama, in which the critique and rejuvenation of public institutions by the people occurs, are omitted. The structural emphasis of Feuer's analysis thus precludes a more developed exploration of the way in which the vigilante politics of the contemporary trauma drama might intersect and overlap with the aesthetics and morality of the ~~classic~~ <sup>female orientated family</sup> melodrama. As I hope to show, however, this intersection becomes particularly apparent in the maternal rape-revenge film and it therefore provides an ideal site not only through which to develop such an analysis, but through which to assess the effects of this intersection on the way in which the feminist stories the rape-revenge film attempts to tell are negotiated. In this chapter, therefore, I want to supplement a comparative structural analysis of the maternal rape-revenge film and the trauma drama with a close textual analysis of the way in which the maternal rape-revenge film deploys the codes and conventions of ~~classic~~ <sup>the female orientated family</sup> melodrama. Significantly, one of the central tenets of both Clover's analysis of the rape-revenge film and feminist writing on melodrama is that these films privilege a female point of view. My discussion of the relationship between melodrama and the maternal rape-revenge film will thus focus particularly on relations of looking and

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 32.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30 and p. 31 respectively.



patterns of investigation, especially the way in which 'the look' works to construct distinctions between public and private space, guilt and innocence. Because it is the more visually and textually sophisticated of the two films, this discussion will concentrate mainly on *Eye for an Eye*. First, however, I want to explore the extent to which the maternal rape-revenge film can be seen to conform to the structure and ideology of the trauma drama. Here, I will be particularly concerned to evaluate both Feuer's claim that it is the films which depart from the usual eight step plot structure that can be 'read against the grain of the more hegemonic films that contain all eight steps', and her suggestion that in the 1990s the politics of the trauma drama became less unambiguously right-wing 'especially when the trauma concerns women's issues'.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter 5 I analysed the way in which the rape-revenge structure has been mapped over the genre of the western or, more specifically, the 'vengeance variation' identified by Will Wright in his structural analysis of the genre.<sup>15</sup> Here, I argued that feminism and the introduction of new functions and 'variations' into the western brought about changes at the level of narrative structure, the oppositions it articulated and thus the meanings it generated. Feuer seems to be arguing a similar point in relation to the trauma drama, and clearly the rape-revenge film would seem to be one of the primary sites for the explication of the 'women's issues' Feuer refers to. In fact, there is a remarkable similarity between the structure and functions of the trauma drama and Wright's vengeance variation, not least in their overarching themes of individuals against institutions (the trauma drama) and individuals against values (the vengeance variation). The crucial difference, however, lies in the fact that

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37 and p. 42n14 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).



whereas the films which most closely approximated the structure and functions of the vengeance variation were specifically *female* rape-revenge films, those that most closely approximate the structure and functions of trauma drama are specifically *maternal* rape-revenge films. What I am suggesting, in other words, is that the maternal rape-revenge film's coupling of a discourse of rape with a discourse of maternity complicates attempts to read these films against the grain of the right-wing politics of the trauma drama. Against Feuer's claim that when the trauma concerns women's issues the politics of the trauma drama are less unambiguously right-wing, then, I want to argue that the maternal rape-revenge film mobilizes 'women's issues' largely in the service of both patriarchal and right-wing ideologies, particularly those inherent in backlash politics.

Both *In My Daughter's Name* and *Eye for an Eye* appear to conform with functions 1-5 of Feuer's trauma drama structure. Both films open with preparations for the birthday party of a family member (the father in *In My Daughter's Name*, the younger daughter in *Eye for an Eye*) and therefore suggest 'the ideal and norm of happy American family life' (function 1).<sup>16</sup> These scenes are, however, undercut not, as Feuer suggests is the case in *Friendly Fire*, by the impending trauma, but by a sense of fissure and frictions within the family itself. In *In My Daughter's Name*, for example, the mother (Laura) and her teenage daughter (Carly) are constantly arguing. Although the film suggests that this is the normal pattern of mother/daughter relations, there is also a sense in which the finger of blame for this state of affairs is pointed clearly at lack of paternal authority or the 'weak' father, as Laura (Donna Mills) complains to her husband, Michael (John Getz), 'Why do I always have to be

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<sup>16</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 25.

the bad cop?'. Likewise, in *Eye for an Eye*, the mother (Karen) is a divorcee with a similarly ineffectual second husband (Mack). Similarly the films that Feuer argues are 'easily interpreted as left-wing or at least subversive inversions of the formula'. These films too tend to undercut 'the ideal and norm of happy American family life'. In *The Burning Bed* this is achieved through the way in which 'the scenes of normative family life [...] are narrated from the perspective of its abysmal failure' whilst, in *An Early Frost*, the presence of a gay son is 'so disruptive of the idealized nuclear family that the film is unable to complete the pattern'.<sup>17</sup> Finally, in *Unnatural Causes*, as in *Eye for an Eye*, the sanctity of the American family is undermined by the presence of a divorced parent.

What I want to argue, however, is that in the maternal rape-revenge film it is not the traditional conservative ideal of the American family that is being subverted or critiqued. Rather, as in the right-wing trauma drama *Toughlove*, it is the permissive, liberal family of the 1960s and 1970s. In *My Daughter's Name*, for example, explicitly identifies the parents with a liberal sensibility rooted in the 1960s through references to the music of James Brown. In fact, *In My Daughter's Name* and *Eye for an Eye* go one further than *Toughlove* in locating the origins of the permissive family in specific liberal discourses, particularly those of feminism. For instance, in *In My Daughter's Name*, the problems threatening the family are traced to the loss of paternal authority (indicated by the father's abdication of his role as disciplinarian), a state of affairs which can in turn be traced to feminist attacks on both the family and male authority. Indeed, here the feminist politics of rape-revenge are specifically constructed as constituting an attack on the family. This is made explicit in Michael's comment to Laura after she has shot and killed her daughter's rapist: 'You're

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37 and p. 38 respectively.



destroying us, our family.' Laura's retort (whilst looking pointedly at Michael): 'I did what had to be done. *Somebody* had to', moreover, functions to undermine the feminist connotations of her actions whilst simultaneously further implicating feminism in the destruction of the family. In other words, it suggests that Laura has usurped the traditionally masculine role of avenger and defender of the family not out feminist principle, but because feminism has alienated men from their proper masculine roles within the family. Michael's business, a plant nursery, is significant in this respect since it expressly associates him with the traditional feminine role of nurturer.

In contrast, in *Eye for an Eye*, Karen's divorce, and thus the absence of her daughter's biological father, would appear to function not only to undermine the conservative ideal of the normal, happy American family, but also to legitimate her *maternal* revenge. In *Eye for an Eye*, however, unlike the apparently subversive *Unnatural Causes*, the divorced parent is both *female* and remarried. In this way, the film is able to lay the blame for the disruption of family life on women (and, by extension, on feminism), whilst simultaneously containing such disruption through the motif of remarriage. It is in this way, I think, that we also need to read the film's articulation of the Eden myth.<sup>18</sup> That the family live on Eden Street is suggestive both of the melodramatic 'Edenic home and family' described by Christine Gledhill and of the 'ideal and norm of happy American family life' found in the trauma drama.<sup>19</sup> In both forms, moreover, as in the original myth, the sanctity of the Edenic family is apparently threatened by external forces. The rape in *Eye for an Eye* would

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<sup>18</sup> The film's title, of course, functions to alert us to its reliance on such biblical allusions.

<sup>19</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 5-39 (p. 21).



appear to fulfil a similar function. Yet, as David Grimsted points out, in melodrama, as in the Eden myth, '*the evil within* [is ...] externalised into the villains who bedevil the virtuous'.<sup>20</sup> With this in mind it is therefore possible to argue that, in *Eye for an Eye*, as in the original myth, it is not the rapist or serpent that brings about the destruction of Eden, but the woman who, through her refusal to be satisfied with her allotted role as man's helpmate within the Edenic home, tempts man to transgress. In other words, as J. C. J. Metford points out: 'Sin entered the world through Eve's disobedience to the divine command not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.'<sup>21</sup> The contemporary implications of the Eden myth as it is articulated in *Eye for an Eye* should thus be clear: it is the woman who 'wants it all' (that is, the feminist) who is responsible for male crimes such as rape. As I will go on to argue, closer analysis of the film not only bears out this interpretation, but suggests that the narrative trajectory of the film is, like that of the Eden myth, towards relocating women as wives and mothers in the home (Eve's curse for her transgression was, as Joan Comay observes, 'to bear children in pain and sorrow, and to be ruled by her husband').<sup>22</sup> For the moment, however, I simply want to propose that to Feuer's list of the liberal institutions which the trauma drama names as a threat to the American family we need to add feminism.

Both *In My Daughter's Name* and *Eye for an Eye*, however, follow functions 2-5 of the trauma drama almost exactly:

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<sup>20</sup> David Grimsted, 'Vigilante Chronicle: The Politics of Melodrama Brought to Life', in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), pp. 199-213 (p. 200, my emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> J. C. J. Metford, *Dictionary of Christian Lore and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Comay, *Who's Who in the Old Testament together with the Apocrypha* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p. 126.

2. A trauma occurs.
3. The victims/parents seek help through established institutions.
4. The institutions are unable to help them and are shown to be totally inadequate.
5. The victims take matters into their own hands.<sup>23</sup>

The failure of the judicial system to properly punish the rapists in both these films would thus appear not only to conform to the trauma drama's critique of liberal institutions, but to suggest a feminist critique of a patriarchal legal system which is complicit with rapists, not least because the rapist's trial in *In My Daughter's Name* is dominated by male judges and lawyers. In both films, however, the characterization of the rapist helps to distance him from identification with the legal system and patriarchal society as a whole. For example, *Eye for an Eye* uses the stereotype of the rapist as 'psychopath' in order to differentiate him from the majority of 'normal' men. In particular, the rapist, Robert Doob (Kiefer Sutherland), is consistently associated, both visually and verbally, with dogs (for example, he is described as marking 'his territory like a dog' and as a 'piece of dog shit'), an association which works to construct him as little more than an animal, as sub-human. There is, however, also an important class dimension to this canine characterization. According to Grimsted, the kinds of terms the vigilante chroniclers of the mid-nineteenth century used to describe their victims were those 'that reek of low social status' such as 'canaille', which is significantly derived from the Latin, 'canis', meaning dog.<sup>24</sup> Like the villains of the vigilante chronicles, then, Doob's

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<sup>23</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> David Grimsted, 'Vigilante Chronicle: The Politics of Melodrama Brought to Life', in *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1994), pp. 199-213 (p. 207).



association with dogs also functions to differentiate him from the rest of normal society on the basis of class.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in *In My Daughter's Name*, despite the fact that the rapist's insanity plea is deliberately constructed as far-fetched and thus unbelievable, any suggestion that he is, in fact, 'normal' is undermined when Laura tells his mother: 'When I look at your son, I see a monster.' More interestingly perhaps, the rapist, Peter Lipton (Adam Storke), is also characterized as a spoilt only child, the license plate of his brand new BMW, for example, bears the registration 'RICH KID'. In contrast, Laura's car is old and continually breaking down. Thus, like *Eye for an Eye*, the distinction between rapist and victim is also understandable in terms of class. Unlike *Eye for an Eye*, however, *In My Daughter's Name* relies not on the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie found in the vigilante chronicles, but on that between aristocracy and the bourgeoisie found in the traditional melodrama. Indeed, according to Thomas Elsaesser, this conflict is frequently interpreted metaphorically 'as sexual exploitation and rape'.<sup>26</sup> The scene in *In My Daughter's Name* which reveals the graffiti Laura has daubed on Lipton's car, makes this connection explicit through the way in which the camera tracks from the 'RICH KID' of the car's license plate to the words 'killer' and 'rapist' spray painted across the car's bonnet and windscreen. While this could perhaps be interpreted as a subversive critique of the class system and particularly white, male privilege, I want to suggest another interpretation. Peter Lipton is not simply a member of the upper-class, he is a 'rich kid', a spoilt only child, a 'mummy's boy'.

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<sup>25</sup> The contrast drawn between the different neighbourhoods Karen and Doob inhabit, and between Doob's job as a delivery man and the spectacular consumption of Megan's birthday preparations, also function to cement this class distinction. The visual excess apparent in the scenes depicting the preparation for Megan's party is, moreover, characteristic of the melodramatic style.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 512-535 (p. 515).



He is, in other words, the product of an over-indulgent, liberal mother and an absent father, that is, of the permissive, antiauthoritarian family of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the absence of a patriarchal authority figure suggests that the burden of guilt for Lipton's behaviour lies not simply with the permissive family, but with his mother and, more specifically, feminism. The issue of maternal guilt is, furthermore, raised again at the end of the film where it is posited as the reason for Laura's violent revenge on her daughter's rapist (rather than the public act of rape prevention she claims it to be). In contrast, the motivation for the new-right zealotry found in the trauma drama is, according to Feuer, 'often maternal love':

This motivation creates a contradictory position for the mothers portrayed in these films. In the deepest sense of New Right ideology, these are traditional women left behind by feminism. And yet, as in the case of many New Right ideologues, these mothers are the only people left in the culture who retain the moral righteousness necessary to the task. Therefore they (always reluctantly) take on a masculine role for the sake of their victimized children.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly the substitution of morally justified mothers for female victim-avengers would seem the obvious way not only to insert a new right ideology of family values into the rape-revenge cycle, but also to militate against or divert its potentially subversive feminist politics. However, this would still leave the issue of male complicity in rape largely unresolved. What I want to suggest, therefore, is that when the rape-revenge narrative's feminist stories meet a new right ideology of family

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<sup>27</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 31.

values in the maternal rape-revenge film, the politics Feuer identifies in the trauma drama become rather more complex and perhaps, more sinister.

Nevertheless, like those trauma dramas that Feuer identifies as interpretable as left-wing or subversive inversions of the formula, *In My Daughter's Name* omits function 6 ('they form a self-help group or join a grass-roots organization'), and neither *In My Daughter's Name* or *Eye for an Eye* include function 7 ('the new organization is better able to cope with the trauma, often having an impact on established institutions'). Thus, it is not the judicial system that the mothers in both these films attempt to take on or change. Rather, hers is an intensely private and personal battle waged against another *individual* and, although she may try to enlist the help of other victims or potential victims or join a self-help group (as in *Eye for an Eye*), these sources of support either reject, or are rejected by, her. What I want to suggest, then, is that while functions 6 and 7 are clearly crucial to the trauma drama's right-wing message of 'the rebirth of America through right-wing individualist populist activity', their omission or variation does not necessarily make the films left-wing or subversive in sentiment.<sup>28</sup> Instead, the omission of these crucial functions can also have the effect of tipping the balance of these films away from the politicized public solutions of the trauma drama towards the depoliticized private solutions of the domestic melodrama, a movement that has important consequences for the way in which these films make sense of the feminist stories inscribed within the rape-revenge narrative.

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.



## MELODRAMA AND THE MATERNAL AVENGER

The question posed by *Eye for an Eye*'s publicity poster – 'What do you do when justice fails?' – would nevertheless appear to invite a reading of the film as an articulation of the same kind of vigilante politics Feuer identified in the trauma drama. This is certainly the framework within which the film was understood by reviewers.<sup>29</sup> The film's opening, credit sequence, however, rephrases this question and asks more specifically: do you kill for your child? A moth flutters around a child's bedroom, the child, terrified, calls for her mother. When the mother arrives the child pleads 'Kill it mummy. Please kill it'. The mother, disregarding her daughter's pleas, gently catches the moth in her hands and carefully puts it out of the window. Here, then, the mother is clearly constructed as the preserver rather than the taker of life. This sequence also sets up a distinction between internal and external spaces, and situates the window as the interface between those spaces. In other words, this internal, domestic scene is immediately followed by an external tracking shot of the house. This shot is, moreover, accompanied by the sound of footsteps and breathing on the soundtrack suggesting that it is also a point of view shot. However, the film withholds the initial establishing shot of the shot/reverse-shot structure, thus posing another question: who is looking? Over this shot the film's title appears suggesting that we read this title, and hence the film, not only literally, as a revenge drama, but also metaphorically, as a drama of seeing. This interpretation is reinforced in the next shot, a close-up of a mirror in which Karen's eye is reflected and magnified. While this shot does not provide an 'answer' to the previous one, it does suggest, through the magnification of Karen's eye, that she has an active and

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Simon Fanshawe, 'Long Running Marathon', *Sunday Times* (Section 10), 9 June 1996, pp. 12-13.



powerful gaze and therefore a privileged relation to seeing. She is, however, using the mirror to apply make-up and this shot, to use Mulvey's terms, thus positions her not only as 'bearer of the look' but as an object 'to-be-looked-at'. Indeed, Karen's status as erotic spectacle is assured when, having completed her make-up, her husband, Mack (Ed Harris), attempts to seduce her. Here then the magnification of Karen's eye functions to construct the female gaze not as powerful but as narcissistic.

Although as the film progresses, Karen's gaze appears to become more active (she follows and watches Robert Doob, the man who has raped and murdered her daughter), the process of looking is still sexually differentiated by means of the window. The topography of spaces the film employs and their relation to processes of specularization, are thus remarkably similar to those found in the woman's film. As Mary Ann Doane observes in her discussion of such films:

Within the "woman's films" as a whole, images of women looking through windows or waiting at windows abound. The window has special import in terms of the social and symbolic positioning of the woman – the window is the interface between inside and outside, the feminine space of the family and reproduction and the masculine space of production. It facilitates a communication by means of the look between two sexually differentiated spaces. That interface becomes a potential point of violence in the paranoid woman's films.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 67-82 (p. 72).

In *Eye for an Eye*, then, Karen (Sally Field) is always positioned on the inside looking out, for example, through café windows, shop windows and car windows at Doob, whereas Doob is always located on the outside looking in, for example, through the window of the play house at Megan (Alexandra Kyle) and at the Hispanic woman through her kitchen window. In this way, therefore, *Eye for an Eye*, like the woman's film, employs the window to construct a distinction between public, masculine space and private, feminine space. The window, however, also acts as a framing device so that the woman standing at (in the case of the Hispanic woman), or looking out of, a window is constructed as much as 'to-be-looked-at' as looking. Furthermore, the scene in which Karen watches Doob watching the Hispanic woman, would seem to merely reproduce the relations of looking established in the post-credit sequence and succinctly summarized by John Berger: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.'<sup>31</sup> Indeed, at the end of this scene Doob returns Karen's gaze so that she too becomes the object of his look. Again, then, any implications of an active female gaze suggested by close-ups of Karen's eyes (here reflected in the rear-view mirror of her car) are undermined. Similarly, when Karen triumphantly tells Dolly (Beverly D'Angelo) about watching Doob she pointedly removes her glasses. As Doane has argued: 'Glasses worn by a woman in the cinema do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking.'<sup>32</sup> Karen's admission of her appropriation of the gaze is, in other words, potentially so threatening and dangerous that it must be accompanied by a simultaneous rejection of the power to see, symbolized by the removal of her glasses.

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<sup>31</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin/BBC, 1972), p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 41-57 (p. 50).



Finally, Dolly's response to Karen's admission is to suggest that Karen is mad:

'Jesus Christ, Karen, what are you doing. This is insane.'

Like the female gothic melodrama or paranoid woman's films, therefore, *Eye for an Eye* is characterized both by the heroine's investigation of a man and by a tendency to question or undermine her perceptions. This is particularly apparent in an early scene before Doob has been identified as the rapist/murderer. Karen, Mack and Megan visit a museum where Megan keeps running on ahead of them. As she becomes increasingly frantic about Megan's safety, Karen imagines that every man she encounters is the rapist/murderer. The apparent feminist point to this scene that 'all men are potential rapists' is, however, undermined in the exchange that follows where Karen tells Mack to stop treating her like 'some neurotic', to which Mac retorts, 'Well don't act like one.' Furthermore, the evidence that Karen collects during her investigation of Doob is, on two occasions, systematically undermined by the detective in charge of the case.

Karen's job as Director of Public Affairs at 'The Media Museum' also suggests a concern with issues of spectatorship. However, while televisions are very frequently on in the background of scenes, people are rarely shown watching them. Consequently, although we briefly see Megan watching a cartoon and Doob watching a pop video, it is Karen who is privileged as a spectator. Doane proposes that:

The pressure of the demand in the "woman's film" for the depiction of female subjectivity is so strong, and often so contradictory, that it is not



at all surprising that sections such as the projection scenes in *Caught* and *Rebecca* should dwell on the problems of female spectatorship.<sup>33</sup>

In *Eye for an Eye* we twice see Karen watching a video tape of Doob's arrest on the news. By means of the rewind, slow play and freeze frame functions she attempts to control Doob, to fix him as the object of her gaze. Her subsequent investigation of him is predicated not only on dissatisfaction with the narrative resolution of this 'story' (the dismissal of the case against Doob), but represents an attempt to recreate the conditions of this spectatorship. In other words, the pleasure of Karen's investigation of Doob, like that of the cinema spectator, is predicated on her presence not being acknowledged. As she says to Dolly after the first time she follows Doob: 'And he never even knew I was there.' In this respect, the windows through which Karen watches Doob can be seen as corresponding to the cinema screen, while she, usually immobile, can be seen as corresponding to the spectator in the auditorium. This fantasy of inviolability is, however, broken when Doob returns Karen's gaze. While Karen subsequently returns to watching the video tape, this functions to mark a new phase in the narrative – an apparent shift from investigation to punishment (Karen's plans for revenge). In this way, then, the film's narrative trajectory would appear to reverse the traditional gendered relations of looking in the cinema. In other words, Karen appears to have become the subject rather than the object of the voyeuristic gaze described by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey argues that voyeurism functions to guard against the castration anxiety brought about by the representation of the female through

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 196-215 (p. 214).

re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object [...] pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness.<sup>34</sup>

This avenue is, according to Mulvey, 'typified by the concerns of the *film noir*'.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly, this section of the film is marked by a shift from the issues and iconography of the gothic melodrama to the visual style and themes of film noir (although as several critics have argued the two are inextricably linked).<sup>36</sup>

Particularly noteworthy in this respect are scenes of the city at night and of an urban landscape comprised of car parks and back-street garages. For example, in contrast to the forbidding Gothic façade of the building where the support group meetings are held, the garage where Karen plots her revenge with the help of Sidney and Martin is dark and seedy, lit on the outside by a flickering neon sign, while the back office features the traditional noir venetian blinds.<sup>37</sup> The emphasis on the long, black shadows cast by the characters' bodies and on the sound of footsteps ringing out in

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 57-68 (p. 64).

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Cowie outlines the various arguments for the connection between melodrama and film noir in 'Film Noir and Women', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 121-165. *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) represents a particularly interesting example of the combination of melodrama and film noir. For an analysis of this combination see: Pam Cook, 'Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1978), pp. 68-82.

<sup>37</sup> There is also an example of film noir lighting earlier in the film when Karen stumbles across the plot to kill the man who murdered the Gratz's son. Karen discovers Mr. and Mrs. Gratz together with Sidney Hughes in a store room grouped under a harsh, low-slung ceiling light which casts unnatural shadows on their faces. As Paul Schrader notes, in film noir 'ceiling lights are hung low and floor lamps are seldom more than five feet high'. Paul Schrader, 'Notes on Film Noir', *Film Comment*, 8:1 (1972), 8-13 (p. 11).



the empty streets when Karen believes she is being followed one night, is also characteristic of the noir style. Moreover, the camera movement here, in which the camera tracks backwards before Karen as she quickens her pace, is remarkably similar to that described by Place and Peterson as one of the few moving shots found in film noir.<sup>38</sup> This incident also proves to be another example of Karen's paranoia (the man turns out to be friend not foe) and thus of gothic melodrama, whilst further serving to remind us that not all men are potential rapists. However, it also functions to construct Karen, if not as a femme fatale, at least as a 'fatal femme' – she lies in wait for her 'pursuer' and then violently attacks him. What I want to suggest, therefore, is that the shift from the codes of gothic melodrama to those of film noir is accompanied by a concomitant shift in the subject of investigation. In other words, where gothic melodrama is ~~traditionally~~<sup>often</sup> concerned with investigating and establishing the guilt of a man (here Doob), film noir is often concerned with investigating and establishing the guilt of a woman. This section of the film thus actually functions to establish Karen's guilt, variously constructing her as neglectful mother, as violent woman and as sexually aggressive – all significantly attributes of the femme fatale (as neglectful mother, Karen, like the noir heroine, exists outside the family). Here, then, it is Karen who is watched by the other characters. We see Angel (Charlayne Woodard) watching Karen approach Sidney at a support group meeting and we see Mack watching Karen distractedly pushing Megan's swing in the garden (it is perhaps significant here that Karen is positioned outside the home, while Mack is positioned inside looking out through the window). Retrospectively we discover that Karen has indeed been the object of both these characters'

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<sup>38</sup> J.A. Place and L.S. Peterson, 'Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir', in *Movies and Methods Volume I: An Anthology*, ed. by Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 325-338 (pp. 337-338).



investigations (throughout this section of the film several jarring high-angle shots work to suggest that the characters are being watched by some unknown presence). Angel, it transpires, is an FBI officer working undercover to investigate vigilante activity, while Mack, having found Karen's gun club membership card, has been making enquiries which reveal her duplicity. This doubling of the investigative structure 'with stories within stories, so that the investigation of one enigma frames another' is, according to Elizabeth Cowie, characteristic of the film noir and explains its narrative complexity.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the opening of the scene in which Mack confronts Karen about her membership of the gun club is straight out of film noir with Mack playing the role of Philip Marlowe. Karen arrives home to a darkened house, as she steps through the door, however, a lamp is switched on to reveal Mack sitting in an armchair waiting to cross-examine her. Throughout this section of the film, camera shots and visual motifs are also used to suggest imprisonment and therefore to construct Karen as guilty. For example, as she commits herself to killing Doob we see her face framed in close-up between the head and shoulders of the two men standing in the foreground, echoing a similar shot of Doob at the preliminary hearing. Or, there is the tracking shot from in front of some railings as Karen leaves Angel's house having been warned of the consequences of exacting her revenge on Doob.

Karen is also shown to be guilty of neglecting her maternal responsibilities. In fact, there is a case to be made for arguing that the rape itself is constructed as a consequence of this neglect. In other words, Karen is unable to protect Julie (Olivia Burnette) because she is not at *home* but stuck in a traffic jam returning from *work*, a

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, 'Film Noir and Women', in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 121-165 (p. 126).

point underlined in this sequence by cutting between these two spaces and by showing Karen to be in possession of the full trappings of the career woman: smart hairstyle, business suit and mobile phone.<sup>40</sup> More specifically, the cross-cutting between this image of the career woman and the spectacular consumption of Megan's party preparations functions to suggest that, since the family is clearly wealthy, there is no economic imperative or justification for Karen's career. 'I won't leave you Julie', Karen says as she hears her daughter being attacked at the other end of the phone, but the point is thus surely that she already has. Indeed, Julie's response to the news that Karen is going to be late – 'What else is new?' – functions to assure us that Karen's failure to be there to protect Julie is not simply an unusual and unintentional coincidence of fate. Later in the film, moreover, responsibility for preventing unsolicited sexual advances is placed squarely with the woman and particularly the mother – as Karen and Angel work-out at the gym the instructor can be heard intoning in the background 'Knees together, ankles together. Remember what your mother told you'. Similarly, in *In My Daughter's Name*, the rape is implicitly set up not only as a result of Laura's abdication of maternal responsibilities (leaving her daughter to put the chicken in the oven and mind her younger sister whilst she is at *work*, making her buy the napkins), but as a form of wish-fulfilment on Laura's part. In a scene early in the film, Laura asks her husband if they can get rid of the car, which is continually breaking down and is 'so damned annoying'. 'So are the kids', her husband replies, 'we don't get rid of them.' 'Don't tempt me', Laura retorts. Indeed, the implication is that Carly (Ari Meyers) only accepts a lift

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<sup>40</sup> The use of cross-cutting during key sequences is characteristic of the melodramatic style. This technique can also be found in the sequence in which Doob visits Megan at school while Karen is at the gym and in the final sequence. The technique is also used in *In My Daughter's Name* where the rape is intercut with scenes of the father's birthday party.



from her rapist for fear, as she later says, that her mother will, metaphorically at least, 'kill' her if she fails to return promptly with the napkins.

Although after Carly's rape and murder, Laura attempts to compensate for her dereliction of duty by becoming increasingly over-protective of her remaining daughter, Lissa (Ellen Blain), she continues to neglect her maternal responsibilities (such as shopping for food). In *Eye for an Eye*, Karen is shown to be similarly neglectful but, unlike in *In My Daughter's Name*, this neglect also extends to her remaining daughter, Megan. In both films, moreover, the women's investigation and harassment of the men who raped and murdered their daughters is shown to radically compromise the safety of their surviving children suggesting, as Doane does, that 'a certain violence [...] is coincident with the attribution of the gaze to the female'.<sup>41</sup> In *In My Daughter's Name*, for example, Peter Lipton takes out a restraining order on Laura, then comes to her home and implicitly threatens Lissa: 'Lissa, she's pretty. I like her.' Likewise, in *Eye for an Eye*, while Karen is at the gym with Angel, Doob visits Megan at school and afterwards warns Karen, 'Why don't you just stay out of my neighbourhood and I'll stay out of yours.' In recreating the conditions of the original rape (Megan, like Julie, is playing 'house', this time in the school's playhouse, Karen is absent, Doob tells Karen 'I don't really like kiddy pussy, but I'm willing to make an exception') this sequence not only suggests that Karen was similarly responsible for the earlier attack, but in many ways returns us to the beginning of the film. Indeed, the sequence of shots directly following Karen's confrontation with Doob (of Karen putting Megan to bed, shutting and locking the window and of a long, static shot of the house) echo those which open the film,

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 67-82 (p. 69).



whilst the next scene (showing Karen enlisting Sidney's help in planning her revenge) would appear to answer in the affirmative the question this opening sequence posed: 'Do you kill for your child?'. Similarly, in *In My Daughter's Name*, the scene following the one in which Peter Lipton threatens Lissa shows Laura following him to a shopping centre where she shoots and kills him.

Although the decision to kill the man who has killed one daughter and is threatening the other would seem the ultimate act of maternal love and thus morally justified, the ensuing narratives of both films work to undermine such a reading. In *Eye for an Eye*, for example, the series of short sequences which follow Karen's decision to kill Doob function to juxtapose Karen's increasing proficiency in using a gun and defending herself with her growing incompetence as a mother (signalled through her neglectful and distanced behaviour towards Megan). Particularly indicative of Karen's withdrawal from her role in the home is her failure to notice when Megan shows her a picture of a *house* she has drawn (indeed, this crucial *failure* to see contrasts ironically with the unwavering, investigative gaze Karen directs at Doob). Also worth noting here is how, after Karen attacks the man she believes is pursuing her, her initial concern about the violence she has inflicted turns quickly to pleasure. This scene, moreover, cuts directly into one showing Karen and Mack having sex. Whilst the editing here works to make a rather crude and already overworked connection between sex and violence, it also functions to position Karen within a lineage of representations of women who are not only violent but sexually active and aggressive (representations most commonly found in film noir and contemporary neo-noirs). The scene opens with Mack in the traditional, active 'masculine' position on top of Karen. However, Karen then turns over so that she is on top of him and pins him down by the arms. Such a display of active and

aggressive female sexuality is, nevertheless, immediately undermined as Mack pushes Karen off him, holds her at arms length and then returns her to her 'proper' position beneath him.

This section of the film concludes with another visual echo of the film's opening sequence – a long tracking shot of the exterior of the house. Yet, whereas at the beginning of the film we hear Megan calling for her mother, here she is calling for Mack. The scene thus functions to mark the extent to which Karen has strayed from her maternal role but also, as she goes and comforts Megan, to re-position her in that role (just as Mack had re-positioned her in her 'correct' sexual role in the previous scene). The tracking shot of the house also suggests that someone is again watching and it is significantly in the following scenes that we learn that Karen has indeed been the object of investigation. Consequently, Karen decides against killing Doob, a decision she arrives at during Dolly's birthday party. That the next scene depicts the rape and murder of the Hispanic woman is not merely ironic. Rather the juxtaposition of these two scenes also acts as another reminder of the beginning of the film (where, shortly before being raped and murdered, Julie is shown preparing Megan's birthday party). Indeed, lest we fail to make this connection, we have recently been reminded, via a conversation between Megan and Karen, that Julie's death occurred on Megan's birthday.

Tania Modleski, amongst others, has argued that such 'excessive repetition characterizes many film melodramas'.<sup>42</sup> Related to this, and also a point made by several critics of melodrama, is their tendency towards forming a circular pattern. As Christine Gledhill notes, 'many cinematic melodramas start out from a flashback so

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<sup>42</sup> Tania Modleski, 'Time and Desire in the Woman's Film', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 536-548 (p. 539).



that their end literally lies in their beginning'.<sup>43</sup> While *Eye for an Eye* does not start out from a flashback, as I hope to have shown, throughout the course of the narrative there are constant evocations of the film's beginning (themselves a form of 'flashback'). As the film progresses, moreover, these become more frequent and insistent such that when Karen goes to see Detective Denillo (Joe Mantegna) after the rape and murder of the Hispanic woman, their conversation is actually punctuated by several brief flashbacks to earlier points in the film (of Doob attacking Julie and the Hispanic woman, of Doob watching and delivering groceries to the latter). Indeed, this scene is actually a repetition of an earlier one in which Karen visited Denillo after Julie's death to enquire how the case against Doob was progressing. However, whereas in the earlier scene Karen listened meekly as Denillo outlined the various evidence he had collected against Doob, here it is she who details her investigation of Doob (one which Denillo systematically undermines, causing her to retort 'Fuck you'). In this respect, these repetitions serve to mark Karen's transformation from passive, life-preserving mother to active, aggressive woman. Yet, as I noted above with regard to the scene in which Karen comforts Megan after a nightmare, these repetitions are not only or always signifiers of narrative progression. Rather, they can also signify circularity and can thus function to *reverse* narrative transformations.

Clearly, the rape-revenge structure is *itself* based on repetition, something that the phrase 'an eye for an eye' explicitly points up. However, as we have seen, the

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<sup>43</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Melodrama', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 73-84 (p. 80).

See also: Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 512-535 (p. 525).

Tania Modleski, 'Time and Desire in the Woman's Film', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. by Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 536-548 (p. 540).



passage from rape to revenge, from victim to aggressor, usually also necessitates some kind of transformation of the female protagonist. Of course, in the maternal rape-revenge film, this narrative trajectory is complicated by the fact that victim and avenger are not one and the same so that the transformations which occur are not from victim to aggressor but from *mother* to aggressor. As I suggested earlier, this substitution of morally justified mothers for female victim-avengers would seem the obvious way not only to insert a new right ideology of family values into the rape-revenge cycle, but also to militate against or divert its potentially subversive feminist politics. Yet, as I hope to have shown in my discussion of both films, these narratives constantly work to construct the mother not as morally justified but as 'guilty'. Thus, in *In My Daughter's Name*, rather than acting from some maternal moral high ground, Laura acts out of a sense of her *failure* as a mother. The film is thus unable to legitimate her movement from the 'feminine' private realm (of motherhood) to the 'masculine' public realm (of revenge and violence) on the basis of moral righteousness (as in the trauma drama) and Laura must therefore not only be shown to be punished for her actions, but the film's narrative trajectory must, in fact, continuously work to reinscribe her in the realm of the private. As her lawyer, Maureen Leeds (Lee Grant), emphasizes at the end of the film: 'You're not a killer Laura, you're a *mother*.' Indeed, despite Laura's attempts to insist that her actions were those of a sane and rational woman, and despite the fact that she is found guilty of voluntary manslaughter (rather than not guilty by reason of insanity), her lawyer's defence strategies tend to function to undermine any sense of female agency. In addition, Laura's refusal to plead not guilty by reason of insanity on the basis that 'I'm not going to lie to protect myself like he did' works to compound her guilt by implying that she *desires* punishment. Moreover, as I have suggested, this guilt is

often posited precisely as a consequence of ‘narratives of transformation’ (for example, the movement of women from the home into the workplace brought about by feminism). *Eye for an Eye* makes this connection explicit by using the scenes depicting Karen’s transformation to establish her guilt. The maternal rape-revenge film thus does not deploy the rape-revenge structure in order to articulate and negotiate the various transformations brought about by second-wave feminism. Rather, the narrative trajectories of these films is towards reversing these transformations and relocating women as mothers in the home. Indeed, even when the films construct apparently positive feminist representations of career women, such as the female defence lawyer in *In My Daughter’s Name*, they simultaneously work to contain the feminist implications of these representations. For example, while the lawyer’s career motivation can be traced to feminism (she too lost a daughter to male (domestic) violence), this motivation is ultimately channelled into a discourse of motherhood and particularly maternal guilt (the lawyer was oblivious to her daughter’s plight). Thus the lawyer’s motivation in taking on Laura’s case can be read as arising not out of a feminist critique of male violence against women, but out of her need to assuage her own sense of guilt over her daughter’s death. Such a reading is confirmed both by the specific form her defence takes and by her comment to Laura that ‘I’m doing this for both of us’.

*In My Daughter’s Name*, then, follows a similar narrative trajectory to the maternal melodrama in which, as Christian Viviani has observed, ‘the partial or total rehabilitation of the mother is accomplished [...] through a cathartic trial scene’.<sup>44</sup> In *Eye for an Eye* it is achieved by mapping the rape-revenge structure across both the

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<sup>44</sup> Christian Viviani, ‘Who Is Without Sin?: The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-1939’, in *Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 83-99 (p. 86).



generic discourses of <sup>family</sup> melodrama and those of film noir. In other words, the codes of film noir are used to construct Karen as guilty, whilst the repetitive and circular narrative structure of melodrama, although initially used to chart her transformation, ultimately functions to re-position her in the space of the home from which she was absent at the beginning of the film. In this final section of the film, then, Mack and Megan go off on holiday and Karen, having manufactured an excuse to temporarily stay behind, breaks into and ransacks Doob's apartment, leaving her baseball hat behind as a signifier of her presence. As Mack and Megan are shown driving through the countryside, Doob is shown travelling towards his final confrontation with Karen, while Karen is shown at home preparing for this melodramatic resolution by putting on some classical music. Having broken into the house by smashing a window (according to Doane 'a potential point of violence in the paranoid woman's films'), Doob climbs the stairs to the bathroom, where the shower is running.<sup>45</sup> Pulling back the curtain to reveal not Karen but a towel, he swings round to find her aiming a gun at him. The following conversation ensues:

KAREN            Sorry to disappoint you

DOOB             What're you gonna do. Shoot me.

KAREN            You broke into my house with the intent to do me bodily harm. The law says I have the right to protect myself.

DOOB             You want me to say I'm sorry. It could've been anybody. I don't even remember what she looked like.  
Its nothin' personal.

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 67-82 (p. 72).



KAREN            She was seventeen years old. She was five foot two. She had brown eyes. Her name was Julie. She was my daughter.

DOOB            She was a great fuck.

Doob then runs at Karen and knocks the gun out of her hand which falls to the bottom of the stairs. A struggle follows during which Karen falls down the stairs. As she lies on her back at the bottom, Doob walks down the stairs towards her, repeating that it was 'nothin' personal'. 'It's very personal', Karen responds as she grabs the gun and shoots him four times. He falls and lands on top of her. She pushes him off, and the sequence ends with a close-up of Doob's face.

There are several issues I want to pick up on here. The first of these is the way in which this sequence re-enacts the original rape. Clearly, the very act of 'breaking and entering' the 'feminine' space of the home acts as a metaphor for rape. However, there is also the way in which, at the end, Doob falls and lands face down on the prostrate Karen – a position with obvious sexual connotations. Finally, the moment when Doob knocks the gun out of Karen's hand acts as a visual echo of the moment during the original rape when Karen falls over and her mobile phone skids away from her across the pavement. The latter, in particular, functions to suggest that Karen is now in the 'right' place as opposed to the 'wrong' place. Indeed, here it is the father/husband who is shown to be (justifiably) absent and impotent. Like Karen at the beginning, Mack is shown to be far from home unable to make contact because the phone is engaged.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, the end of *Eye for an Eye* would appear to be

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<sup>46</sup> As I pointed out in chapter 3, muteness is a key motif of the 'woman's film'. In *Eye for an Eye* this motif appears in the form of more generalized problems of communication: Julie has a stutter, the language difference prevents Karen from being able to articulate her concerns about Doob to the

informed by the kind of melodramatic resolution identified by Griselda Pollock and summarized by Christine Gledhill:

From Pollock's perspective the women's point-of-view movies and male oedipal dramas have one thing in common: the relocation of the woman as mother, a position that, while fathers may disappear, be rendered silent or impotent, dominates the conclusion of these films.<sup>47</sup>

The melodramatic nature of Karen's revenge is also ensured not only by having it occur in the home, but by specifically locating it on the staircase which, as Gledhill points out, has 'become a standard feature of a cinematic rhetoric in the expression of melodramatic confrontation'.<sup>48</sup> While the film proffers a legal explanation for Karen's decision to exact her revenge on Doob in the 'feminine', private space of the home rather than the 'masculine', public space of the street, this need to act within the confines of the law can in turn be traced to Karen's role as a mother. As Angel says to Karen in the scene immediately preceding her decision not to go along with the planned 'public' revenge (after threats of life imprisonment have failed to change her mind): 'You've got to think about what kind of example you'll be setting Megan.' Moreover, this scene closes with a shot from outside of both women inside the home looking out of the window at children buying ice cream. At this point, it is perhaps worth noting that when Mack attacks Doob earlier in the film, he does so in the 'masculine', public space of the courtroom. A quick glance at other recent

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Hispanic woman, and both Karen at the beginning and Mack at the end are unable to contact home because the phone is engaged.

<sup>47</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Melodrama', in *The Cinema Book*, ed. by Pam Cook (London: BFI, 1985), pp. 73-84 (p. 78). Karen's first husband (and Julie's father) is rendered similarly absent and ineffectual. As Dolly says of him: 'Talk about deadbeat dads.'

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81. Similarly, in *Johnny Belinda* (discussed in chapter 3), Belinda's killing of her rapist, Locky McCormick, is also represented via the motif of the staircase.



parental rape-revenge films reveals a similarly gendered use of space. In the paternal rape-revenge film, *A Time to Kill*, for example, the father's revenge on his daughter's rapists also takes place in the 'masculine', public space of the courthouse (thus equating his revenge, quite literally, with 'the law of the father'). In *In My Daughter's Name*, on the other hand, while Laura's revenge also takes place in a public space (the mall) it is one that is specifically designated as a 'feminine' space for consumption. Furthermore, in the latter film, Laura is shown to be duly punished for her violent incursion into public (albeit 'feminine') space whereas, in the former film, the father is acquitted. The maternal rape-revenge film's emphasis on the private and individual nature of rape and revenge is finally perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Karen's retort to Doob, 'It's very personal.'

Thus despite second-wave feminism's claim that 'the personal *is* political', and despite pointedly referencing the O J Simpson trial and thus contemporary public debates about violence against women, *Eye for an Eye* makes no attempt to represent rape or revenge as feminist or even public issues.<sup>49</sup> In fact, as I hope to have shown, its project is rather to mobilize these issues in the service of articulating a private discourse of maternity. An analysis of the character of Angel proves especially illuminating in this respect. As a black, lesbian mother who is also an FBI officer, Angel's function within the narrative would appear to be to provide a positive, 'feminist' representation of woman. Like the female lawyer in *In My Daughter's Name*, however, Angel's function is actually to investigate Karen, establish her guilt and to re-position her in relation to motherhood through continuously invoking a

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<sup>49</sup> In an early scene depicting Karen at work, the camera ranges across a series of television screens variously showing a musical, a 'he-man' movie, a black and white silent melodrama before briefly coming to rest on a screen relaying the O J Simpson trial. Despite the frequency with which televisions are shown broadcasting in the background of scenes, this is the only instance where the subject matter of the broadcast is clearly and easily identifiable.



discourse of maternity. Angel is thus constructed as the moral guardian of the home and family, as, quite literally, the 'Angel in the House'. The function of these female characters can thus be seen as analogous to that of the doctor in the pre-1970 rape-revenge melodramas I discussed in chapter 3, whose role was similarly to 'cure' the heroine of her rejection of the feminine career and to restore her to her proper role within the confines of the family. Such representations of women in positions of power and authority is thus not a cause for celebration, since their function, like that of the doctor, is simply to legitimate and authorize the discourses of maternity which these films articulate. Furthermore, while *Eye for an Eye* also places women in an investigative role, as I hope to have shown, Angel's gaze is directed towards policing other women's behaviour, whilst Karen's is continually undermined or punished.

The final section of *Eye for an Eye* thus also returns us to the questions of specularity posed at the beginning of the film, particularly the question of 'who is looking?' suggested by the absence of an establishing shot to accompany the tracking point of view shot of the exterior of the house in the film's opening sequence. During the course of the film the combination of the codes of gothic melodrama and those of film noir has tended to complicate these issues by situating woman as both the subject and object of investigation (Doob watches women, Karen watches Doob, Mack and Angel watch Karen). The missing establishing shot is, however, provided in the film's final sequences, where a similar exterior shot of the house is followed by a tracking close-up of Doob's face accompanied by the sound of his footsteps on the soundtrack. The next shot is, moreover, of Karen closing the shower curtain. Given the way in which the shower has functioned within cinematic history as the locus for the erotic display of the female body (see, for example, Hitchcock's *Psycho*), this series of shots would appear to function to re-establish and confirm

traditional relations of looking (man as 'bear of the look', woman as 'to-be-looked-at'). Nevertheless, unlike *Psycho*, *Eye for an Eye* denies us fetishistic shots of the woman's naked body by always positioning the camera on the 'wrong' side of the shower curtain. Similarly, the staircase, according to Doane 'traditionally the locus of specularization of the woman', becomes a site not for erotic display but for violent confrontation.<sup>50</sup> Doane suggests that this de-specularization of the woman is characteristic of the paranoid woman's film where the woman becomes the object of a de-eroticized medical gaze, so that 'in terms of spatial configuration and language the female figure is trapped within the medical discourse of these narratives'.<sup>51</sup> This argument would certainly seem to be applicable to the end of *In My Daughter's Name*, where the lawyer, like the doctor in the woman's film, 'traps' Laura within a discourse of insanity. More significantly, in tracing the origins of this insanity to maternal guilt, the film's 'medical gaze' also functions to ensnare Laura within a discourse of maternity. What I want to suggest is that at the end of *Eye for an Eye*, while Karen is not the object of a specifically *medical* gaze, she is de-eroticized and that this functions similarly to trap her within a discourse of maternity.<sup>52</sup> In other words, in order to re-locate Karen as mother she must simultaneously be desexualized, must be presented not as an erotic object.

Thus perhaps the only form of physical transformation the maternal avenger can be seen to undergo is a process of what Feuer calls 'uglification'.<sup>53</sup> For Feuer this serves to 'democratize' the trauma drama's 'charismatic individual'. Within the

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<sup>50</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'The "Woman's Film": Possession and Address', in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. by Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), pp. 67-82 (p. 72).

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>52</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, as I did earlier, that at the beginning of the film Karen is specifically constructed as both 'insane' and 'neurotic'.

<sup>53</sup> Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: BFI, 1995), p. 22.



context of the rape-revenge cycle, however, this is clearly the opposite to what I have elsewhere identified as a process of 'eroticization'. As I argued in chapter 1, as an articulation of one of the new 'public' femininities described by Hilary Radner, the erotic female avenger functions not only to problematize the gendered binary implicit in the movement from rape (feminine) to revenge (masculine), but to destabilize the distinction between the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere.<sup>54</sup>

Uglification, however, would appear to be virtually synonymous with 'masculinization' (in so far as the binary ugliness/prettiness, like all binaries, is inherently gendered). Ugliness, nevertheless, also carries connotations of sexual unattractiveness and can thus also be understood in terms of the binary desexualized/sexualized, a binary with particular pertinence to the construction and representation of women as either madonnas or whores. While the madonna/whore distinction is somewhat archaic, its influence continues to be felt in contemporary attempts to distinguish between mothers and 'working girls' or between private and public femininities. As the opposite of eroticization, the maternal rape-revenge film's process of uglification would thus appear to work to reverse the direction of the transformations found in the female rape-revenge film and, in particular, to re-establish the ideology of the separate spheres. In other words, uglification serves not to 'masculinize' but to desexualize the maternal avenger, which in the context of my current arguments, places her firmly within the realm of the desexualized femininity of the mother. Contrary to the female rape-revenge film, therefore, the maternal rape-revenge film's process of 'uglification' functions to steer its maternal avenger away

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<sup>54</sup> Hilary Radner, 'Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot', in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner and Ava Preacher Collins (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 56-76 (p. 58).



from an exploration of the sexualized ‘public’ femininities articulated by the female avenger and towards the singular, desexualized ‘private’ femininity of the mother.

According to Radner, one of the key ways in which ‘public’ femininities are constructed and reproduced is through consumer practices such as the buying and wearing of clothes.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the opening sequences of *In My Daughter's Name* focus on shopping and particularly the buying of clothes. Clearly, within the context of my current arguments, this functions to set up an emphasis on ‘public’ femininities from which the film can then depart. However, it also functions to set out the film’s message in microcosm. In other words, Carly’s failure to fulfil her ‘private’ feminine role (putting the chicken in the oven) is shown to be the consequence of her pursuit of ‘public’ femininities (buying a dress), in the same way that Laura’s failure in her ‘private’ role as a mother is shown to be a result of her ‘public’ role as, for example, a working woman and organizer of social events. Furthermore, Laura’s obsession with public appearances (having the right embossed napkins) crucially causes her to overlook her private role of policing her *daughter’s* public appearance when she sends her out to get them. Indeed, the film links Laura’s ill-defined concept of ‘correct’ feminine/maternal behaviour with her ill-defined concept of ‘correct’ feminine appearance. Thus, she will not let Carly wear the recently purchased long, flowery, distinctly ‘girly’ dress to go out with her boyfriend, but she does allow her to go out alone at night to fetch the napkins in a short, black, distinctly ‘sexy’ outfit. Laura’s recognition of this ‘mistake’ – signalled by the fact that it is the former outfit she chooses for Carly to be buried in – moreover, marks the end of the film’s concern with ‘public’ femininities as they are constructed

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<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

through clothes and make-up and the beginning of the movement towards the more 'natural', 'private' femininity of motherhood as it is articulated through uglification, or the shedding of clothes and make-up. Thus while at the beginning of the film, Laura's desire to be 'something else besides a mother' (to borrow a phrase from a classic maternal melodrama, *Stella Dallas*, King Vidor, 1938) is shown not only through the fact that she has a job, but through the way in which she is represented as both sexualized (in an early scene showing she and her husband about to make love) and glamourized (at her husband's birthday party), by the end of the film she is represented as dowdy, haggard and desexualized. Similarly, in *Eye for an Eye*, Karen relinquishes the smart suits, hairstyle and make-up which signify the 'public' femininity of the career woman (lest we fail to register Karen's incursion into the public sphere, it is underlined in her title as 'Director of *Public Affairs*') for the drab, asexual, 'private' femininity of the mother.

This emphasis on the sanctity of motherhood is, however, not simply a feature of the *maternal* rape-revenge film. Rather, that it is a function of the cycle as a whole to construct the mother as sacrosanct is suggested by infrequency with which mothers are featured as rape victims in these films (to my knowledge there are only two such examples: *Positive ID* and *The Rape of Dr. Willis*). At this juncture, it is perhaps worth noting that also infrequent, to the point of non-existence, is the representation of black victims or avengers. As far as I am aware, the only American film to include such representations is *A Time to Kill*.<sup>56</sup> This omission, I think, can be read alongside the construction of the white mother as sacrosanct and thus as *exempt* from rape, as a

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<sup>56</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that the female rape-revenge structure is not unique to the American cinema but appears in the films of other countries and cultures, particularly in Indian cinema. For a discussion of such films see: Lalitha Gopalan, 'Avenging Women in Indian Cinema', *Screen*, 38:1 (Spring 1997), 42-59.



sign of the rape-revenge cycle's complicity with a racist discourse which constructs black women as already 'impure' and thus as *incapable* of being raped.<sup>57</sup> The perceived 'impurity' of the black woman, moreover, also deprives her of the necessary moral justification for revenge. Despite its representation of a black victim and avenger, *A Time to Kill*, can, ironically, be seen as complicit with such racist ideologies. In other words, the film is exceptional not simply because it deals with race, but because it features a child victim and a *paternal* avenger. This refusal to cast a black woman in the role of either victim or avenger suggests that the film conforms with the ideology that constructs black women as 'impure' and thus as not only incapable of being raped, but as morally excluded from exacting revenge.

In contrast, the fact that, in its final sequence, *Eye for an Eye* can only symbolically re-enact the original rape, is suggestive of the sanctity of the white mother as it is constructed through her immunity to rape. Yet, while the film goes to some lengths not to represent Karen as an erotic object, the same visual treatment is, tellingly, not extended to Doob's victims (one a child, the other childless) whose bodies, both during and after their rape and murder, are the subject of brief but fetishistic close-ups. That we are denied similar shots of Doob's body suggests that the film operates firmly within the boundaries of the traditional relations of looking described by Laura Mulvey. In the film's closing scenes, then, Karen is once again the object of (masculine) investigation. Seated in a chair, her face is once more 'framed' in close-up by the police officers who stand before her barraging her with questions. Despite Denillo's interpretation of Doob's killing as 'a clear case of self-

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<sup>57</sup> In many respects, this omission can also be read as an articulation of the racial bias implicit in feminist discourses of rape, which very rarely give any consideration to the rape of black women. One of the few exceptions is Susan Griffin's 'The Politics of Rape', in Susan Griffin, *Made From This Earth: Selections from her Writing, 1967-1982* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), pp. 39-58.



defence', Karen's 'guilt' is not in question: 'I know what you've done here', he tells her, 'you haven't fooled me.' Finally, Mack's arrival, in echoing and reversing Karen's return home after the initial rape, suggests that, in terms of space, of inside and outside, traditional gender roles have also been re-established. In the film's penultimate shot, Mack and Karen sit together on the sofa and, as she bows her head in atonement, he takes her hand in a gesture of forgiveness.

That there have been no new articulations of the rape-revenge structure since *Eye for an Eye* (1995) and *A Time to Kill* (1996) would seem to suggest that the cycle has run its course. Certainly, from the evidence presented above, it would appear that the cycle has, at the very least, come full circle. In chapter 3, I examined the deployment of the rape-revenge structure over a range of genres, particularly melodrama, from the silent period to 1970. In so doing, I attempted to show how the structure functioned in relation to the discourses of gender and genre in the period prior to the rise of second-wave feminism. Here, I argued that the structure largely functioned to endorse and uphold the traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity inscribed in melodrama. In particular, I showed how in these films rape tended to be cast as either resulting in, or resulting from, the heroine's rejection of the feminine career of heterosexual romance and family, and I demonstrated how, in both cases, the threat this represented was apparent in the way in which these narratives worked overtime to return the woman to her 'proper' place within the confines of the family and heterosexual relations. As I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter, the maternal rape-revenge film deploys the codes and conventions of melodrama to similar ideological effect. The occurrence of rape, for example, is similarly traced to the heroine's rejection of the feminine career, and specifically, given the emphasis on

the maternal, to her abdication of her 'private' maternal responsibilities within the home. Unlike the earlier films, however, the maternal rape-revenge film explicitly traces the heroine's rejection of a 'private' feminine identity to her pursuit of the 'public' femininity of the career woman. In this way, then, the maternal avenger's rejection of her feminine vocation, and the rape it is seen to engender, is traced specifically to the political and social changes brought about by feminism in the post-1970 period (such as the increase in working mothers). Indeed, that it is maternal guilt rather than maternal love that drives these women to commit acts of revenge suggests that the aim of these films is not simply to contain the feminist politics of the female rape-revenge cycle, but to effect a dual process of critique and co-option (of 'feminism to family values'). In other words, in constructing the maternal avenger not as morally justified, but as guilty of neglecting her maternal responsibilities, the films are able to lay the blame for rape on the transformations brought about by second-wave feminism, whilst simultaneously constructing an apparently feminist justification (rape prevention) for women's return to the home. Thus, while these films apparently make some concessions to feminist gains, for example through the inclusion of independent career women such as Angel Kosinsky and Maureen Leeds, these gains are appropriated by, and contained within, a discourse of family values. As I hope to have shown, for example, the function of the independent career woman is, like that of the male protagonists of the earlier films, to legitimate and authorize the maternal discourses these films articulate and to restore the heroine to her proper role within the family. Similarly, although the emphasis on male rather than female revenge found in the pre-1970 films would seem to have been reversed, the distinctions drawn between male and female revenge



in these films remain. In other words, while male revenge on behalf of a woman continues to be depicted as a natural, inevitable, and, moreover, morally justified aspect of masculine identity, maternal revenge continues to be subject to the additional legitimating devices and/or punishment I identified in the films of the pre-1970 period. Thus, in so far as the maternal rape-revenge film represents a return to the melodramatic discourses and ideology of these 'pre-feminist' films, its politics can be seen as resolutely those of a backlash against feminism as I defined it at the beginning of this chapter. Indeed, the 'persistently nostalgic vein' that Christine Gledhill has identified in melodrama make it particularly suited to the articulation of a backlash politics, particularly since the melodramatic image of the past is that of 'the Edenic home and family, centring on the heroine as "angel in the house"'.<sup>58</sup> Yet, as Gledhill points out, because melodrama 'operates within the frameworks of the present social order', its address is not so much to 'how things ought to be than to how they should have been'.<sup>59</sup> That the backlash is driven by a similar desire to return to an impossible past allows me to temper the somewhat pessimistic tone of this chapter with a more optimistic conclusion. In other words, as Elizabeth Traube has argued

while right-wing antifeminism indeed became a powerful social force during the 1980s, it represents the residual ideology of a declining minority. Despite the political gains that the "pro-family" movement has achieved, it remains a backlash movement, an attempt to repress newer, unequally distributed possibilities and to return to an idealized past. If

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<sup>58</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home Is Where The Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), pp. 5-39 (p. 21).

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.



studies from the 1990s are to be believed, the majority of women and men in America do not anticipate any such return.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth G. Traube, *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), p. 165.

## CONCLUSION: FEMINISM, FILM AND THEORY

Like most academics engaged in a long-term research project in the humanities, I have often had doubts as to the importance and significance of my research. The question I have perhaps asked myself most often is the one posed so forcefully by Stuart Hall: 'Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?' or, for that matter, of feminist film theory.<sup>1</sup> It is this question of the relationship between theory and politics, the academic and the public, that I want to address here, one that I think *must* be addressed by any intellectual work that claims to be informed by feminism. This will involve a shift in focus from an analysis of the rape-revenge cycle's *textual* negotiation of feminism, to a consideration of the various *theoretical* negotiations *with* feminism that have underpinned this analysis.

Traditionally, feminist film theory has fallen into two, broad categories: the theory of feminist films and film theory informed by feminism. The first has tended to concentrate on constructing and analysing a 'feminist' canon of films, the second on producing feminist critiques of classical Hollywood cinema. Both assume, therefore, that feminism exists *a priori* film and both then proceed to evaluate films in terms of an 'authentic' feminism which is seen to exist outside the sphere of representation. The evolution of these two types of feminist film theory can largely be traced to the influence of Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.<sup>2</sup> Here Mulvey used an analysis of the patriarchal construction of femininity in classical Hollywood

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 277-294 (p. 284).

<sup>2</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. by Constance Penley (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 57-68.

film to call for the development of a politically and aesthetically radical avant-garde that would challenge the basic assumptions of mainstream film. The distinction Mulvey's analysis drew between mainstream film as the site where normative femininities are constructed, and thus patriarchal ideology reproduced, and a feminist avant-garde, continues to inform the work of feminist film theorists today. This is particularly apparent in Carol Clover's work on the rape-revenge film which, despite its radical revision of Mulvey's theories concerning spectatorship and the male gaze, continues to draw a subtle distinction between depoliticized, 'feminine' mainstream film and politicized, 'feminist' alternative film.

The distinctions drawn over twenty years ago in response to analyses of classical Hollywood cinema are, however, perhaps no longer applicable to a film industry that has not only seen massive changes in production, distribution and exhibition, but whose producers and consumers are now familiar with, at the very least, the most basic tenets of feminism. As I argued in chapter 1, for example, the advent of new technologies such as television and video, and the subsequent growth in media literacy amongst consumers, has changed the historical development and function of genres, and thus the way in which they construct gender. As Annette Kuhn has recently argued, then, it is becoming 'decreasingly possible now to insist upon a qualitative break between dominant and alternative cinemas'.<sup>3</sup> Such changes clearly owe a good deal to the success of feminist film theory in putting political issues on the popular agenda. However, many films now also exhibit such a high degree of self-consciousness about the kinds of theoretical paradigms which have been used to analyse them, that many of the central tenets of feminist film theory have become

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<sup>3</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Verso, 1994), p. 220.



obsolete or at least in need of historicizing. This is particularly true of the kinds of psychoanalytic concepts which informed early feminist film theory, and particularly Mulvey's work on the 'look'. Both *The Last Seduction* and *Batman Returns*, for example, contain such knowing references to castration anxiety, the phallic woman and fetishism that to attempt a serious psychoanalytically informed analysis would be to play straight into the films' hands.

For these reasons, I want to propose that the most appropriate and politically expedient form feminist film theory can take today is not one which attempts to *separate* feminist film from mainstream film, the political from the popular, but one which attempts to theorize the *relationship* between feminism and film, the political and the popular, the contextual and the textual. The influence on the development of feminist film theory of text-based structuralist analyses and ahistorical psychoanalytic theories has, however, left it ill-equipped to analyse such relationships. In attempting such an analysis, I have thus been forced to look beyond the theoretical parameters of feminist film theory to cultural studies, and particularly to the theory of hegemony. Whilst it is generally recognized that films do not reflect, but rather construct, reality, the notion of hegemony allows us to go one stage further and argue that the reality that films construct is a product of a process of negotiation and struggle between competing and often contradictory *versions* of reality. Against feminist film theory's tendency to argue that films either tell dominant patriarchal stories (mainstream film) or oppositional feminist stories (alternative film or readings 'against the grain' of mainstream film), the concept of hegemony allows us to see film as the site where dominant and oppositional meanings are negotiated and transformed. The benefits of the theory of hegemony for a politically informed feminist analysis are thus twofold. Firstly, it enables us to account for and understand

the process of change, a project which is surely crucial for any intellectual discipline with an investment in bringing about cultural, social and political change. Secondly, as Tony Bennett has observed:

In suggesting that the political and ideological articulations of cultural practices are *movable* – that a practice which is articulated to bourgeois values today may be disconnected from those values and connected to socialist ones tomorrow – the theory of hegemony opens up the field of popular culture as one of enormous political possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

I want to explore some of those political possibilities here.

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to show how films, and indeed the business of analysing them, work to produce and construct various popular, public understandings of feminism. Given the cultural pessimism that pervades many recent accounts of popular film as simply an articulation of a right-wing backlash against feminism, I have been particularly concerned to analyse how popular film might attempt to negotiate the competing and sometimes contradictory demands of feminism and the New Right. In so doing, I hope to have shown how feminism was not simply rejected but negotiated, was both invoked and suppressed, legitimated and critiqued, appropriated and contained, popularized and depoliticized. I have thus argued that this process of negotiation offers a challenge to accepted definitions of post-feminism as implying that feminism is somehow over or past. Rather, post-feminism is perhaps better understood as a process through which feminism is accommodated by dominant culture and various ‘common-sense’ or public meanings

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Bennett, ‘Introduction: Popular Culture and “the turn to Gramsci”’, in *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, ed. by Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. xi-xix (p. xvi).



of feminism produced. While many of these meanings are thus tailored to the perpetuation of a capitalist hegemony, they also retain some of their oppositional charge. Indeed, as Christine Gledhill has argued, 'the ambivalence of textual negotiation produces a wider address – more servicable to a capitalist industry – than a more purely feminist text, or counter-text could'.<sup>5</sup> This ambivalence, however, also opens up spaces for feminist negotiations and appropriations. As Gledhill goes on to suggest:

The productivity of popular culture lies in its capacity to bring these different dimensions into contact and contest; their negotiations contribute to its pleasures. We need to attend to such pleasures if we are to appreciate what holds us back as well as what impels us forward, and if cultural struggle is to take place at the centre of cultural production as well as on the margins.<sup>6</sup>

For this reason, feminist film theory needs to continue to rethink and revise its perennial suspicion of popular culture, together with some of the received theoretical orthodoxies that fuel and reinforce this suspicion. This would free us to channel our energies into the more politically productive project of understanding how feminist orthodoxies are being constructed and circulated, received and negotiated, outside the academy, in the public domain. Indeed, such a project is surely crucial if we are to bridge the gap between theory and politics, the academic and the public, and intervene in this all important process of meaning making. Thus, as feminists, it is crucial that we not only understand, but enter into, this process, that our analyses of it

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'Pleasurable Negotiations', in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. by E. Deidre Pribram (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 64-89 (p. 87).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.



are not only *descriptive* but *productive*. As Stuart Hall argues, we need a theoretical practice 'which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which it would make some difference, in which it would have an effect'.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I want to conclude this discussion with an exploration of the implications of my research for feminist pedagogy, since it is through teaching that we make our first, and often only, interventions into the world outside the academy.

Twice during the last academic year I have been surprised to find my female students producing articulate feminist critiques of The Spice Girls. I was surprised for two reasons. Firstly, these were first year students with little or no formal training in feminist theory, yet they spoke eloquently of how The Spice Girls reinforced feminine stereotypes, of how they were appropriating and exploiting feminism for financial gain and of how, at the very least, their brand of feminism was depoliticized and did little to address the very real problems facing women today (particularly inequality in the workplace and the home). Secondly, I was surprised because, despite their seemingly feminist-inspired critiques of The Spice Girls, none of my students would explicitly identify themselves as a feminist. Instead, they projected an identity that seemed remarkably similar to the stylized performance of femininity for which they had criticized The Spice Girls. There are, I think, a number of reasons for this apparent contradiction. The simplest of these is that feminist ideas have become so much part of young people's 'common sense' that they no longer explicitly identify the ideas or themselves with feminism. The second reason is a pedagogical one. In other words, they produced what they thought was the 'correct' feminist reading, despite the fact that it contradicted their own lived experience of

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 277-294 (p. 286).

femininity.<sup>8</sup> Of course, in terms of its application of certain theoretical paradigms it did represent one correct reading, and learning to apply such paradigms is clearly an important part of gaining an academic qualification. But feminism is surely about more than academic qualifications. With the decline of movement feminism and the institutionalization of academic feminism it is often easy to lose sight of the fact feminism is essentially a movement for political and social change. We will lose sight of this aspect of feminism, however, if we continue to uncritically teach a feminism that contradicts the lived experience of our students, which fails to take account of the way in which, as Angela McRobbie points out,

the old binary opposition which put femininity at one end of the political spectrum and feminism at the other is no longer an accurate way of conceptualizing young female experience [...]. It is no longer a question of those who know (the feminists, the academics) against those who do not, or who are the 'victims' of ideology.<sup>9</sup>

If we are to make feminism mean more to our students than a degree certificate, we need to find a model of feminist theory and pedagogy that acknowledges, and attempts to negotiate, the contradictions between their lived experience of femininity/feminism and academic feminism, and which allows them to make sense of their own, historically and culturally specific, relationship to feminism. This would mean acknowledging the changing political and institutional context in our feminist teaching and historicizing feminist theory. It would mean acknowledging the way in which the university is no longer the locus of radical politics and protest it

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<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Brunsdon discusses the problems of feminist pedagogy at greater length in 'Pedagogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres', *Screen*, 32:4 (Winter 1991), 364-381.

<sup>9</sup> Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 158.



was in the 60s and 70s, but an increasingly commercial, corporate venture. It would mean recognizing, therefore, that the political context in which academic feminism was originally produced and understood no longer exists for our students and that, with the introduction of loans and tuition fees, education is increasingly being viewed as a commodity, rated not for its cultural and social 'use value' but for its economic 'exchange value' in the jobs market. In acknowledging this changing context, it would mean trying to retain a sense of the existence and viability of feminist politics against those that would characterize this period as simply one of post-feminism or backlash. It would mean recognizing, in other words, that while ideas about post-feminism have clearly been formed in the wake of popular understandings of Reaganism and Thatcherism, they do not simply reflect those ideologies. Rather, as I argued in my analysis of *The Last Seduction*, these ideas arise out of a process of negotiation between the discourses of Reaganism and the discourses of feminism, articulated here through the film's combination of a Reaganite success story and a feminist revenge story. Consequently, while in some ways the film can be seen as co-opting feminist discourses about violence against women to a Reaganite ideology, its specific articulation of this ideology can also be seen as enabling and justifying feminist desires to 'have it all'. In so doing, however, the film also negotiates and redefines the very notion of 'having it all'. In other words, while in traditional feminist discourse, 'having it all' more often than not meant giving things up (particularly heterosexual femininity as it is constructed through adornment and consumerism), the negotiations that occur between 70s feminism and the 80s culture of consumption in *The Last Seduction* suggest that it is now possible to 'have', for some women at least, *both* femininity *and* feminism. Indeed, as it has long been recognized in feminist subcultural analyses, feminine



competencies and practices, especially those centred around consumption and dressing up, can in many ways be read as forms of resistance to fixed images of femininity. As I argued in my analysis of the figure of Catwoman, the challenge this represents to the notion of stable, discreet, unified identities suggests that the distinction between constructed feminine identities and authentic feminist identities on which early second-wave feminism depended is perhaps no longer (was maybe never) tenable.

We also need to acknowledge, therefore, the way in which, with the decline of movement feminism and the increasing cost of higher education, popular culture has become one of the primary ways in which feminism is now lived and experienced by the majority of women. This would mean, then, not presenting popular culture as simply a debased feminine realm, but as a realm in which popular understandings of feminism are constructed and circulated, received and negotiated. Indeed, as I pointed out in my analyses of *The Last Seduction* and *Batman Returns*, many films are extremely knowing about both the feminine and the feminist stories they invoke and address their spectators as equally knowledgeable. In so doing, they allow their spectators to view the versions of feminism and femininity they construct with a degree of irony and critical detachment, and thus open up spaces for the appropriation and negotiation of these versions of feminism and femininity. As such, these texts provide a rich source of critical and political debate about the meanings of, and relationship between, femininity and feminism, a debate which, more importantly, frequently extends beyond, or originates outside of, the classroom. Whilst the controversy surrounding *Thelma and Louise* discussed in chapter 4 is, of course, a case in point, The Spice Girls represent a perhaps more contemporary and more pervasive example. The much-maligned notion of 'Girl Power', for example,

can be seen as representing an attempt to negotiate a reconciliation between femininity and feminism. In a section entitled 'I've got Girl Power because ...' in their book *Girl Power!*, each member of the group outline the specific negotiations this has involved for them.<sup>10</sup> In suggesting that 'Girl Power'/feminism is neither exclusive nor unitary, the section opens up an important space in which young women might begin to think about what feminism means to them and in which, in addressing why they might have 'Girl Power', they can begin to gain a sense of their own power and agency in the world.

As Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment argue, then, as feminists 'we cannot afford to dismiss the popular by always positioning ourselves outside it'.<sup>11</sup> Instead, they suggest we need to find ways in which we can intervene in the mainstream to make feminist meanings both a part of our 'commonsense' and 'a part of our pleasures'.<sup>12</sup> The way in which films such as *Thelma and Louise* and *Batman Returns* articulate popular, common-sense versions of feminism can perhaps be seen as a testament to the success of this project. We still need, however, 'to convert commonsense into "good sense"', whilst recognizing that we do not have a monopoly on either.<sup>13</sup> In re-appropriating these common-sense meanings for the purposes of teaching good sense, we would need, for example, to remain alert to the symbiotic relationship between feminism and popular culture I have been arguing for throughout. In other words, we would need to recognize that good sense does not exist prior to, but emerges out of our negotiations with, common sense. In particular,

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<sup>10</sup> The Spice Girls, *Girl Power!* (London: Zone/Chameleon Books, 1997), pp. 6-7.

<sup>11</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 'Introduction', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp. 1-7 (p. 2).

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 2.



we would need to attend to the problems inherent in the versions of feminism constructed and circulated in popular culture, whilst acknowledging our own complicity in the production and perpetuation of such understandings of feminism. For example, whilst we might want to criticize the rape-revenge cycle for constructing a version of feminism which is unequivocally white, heterosexual and middle-class, we would also need to recognize the way in which this is, in some ways, simply an articulation of a bias already implicit in feminism.<sup>14</sup> I am only too aware that this study, in many ways, merely serves to perpetuate that bias and the hegemony of white, heterosexual, middle-class feminism. I do not, however, feel authorized to speak from any other position than that constructed for me by my race, class and sexual identity. What I *have* tried to do is to problematize the historically specific identity 'feminist', particularly its tendency to exclude the overtly erotic or feminine woman, whilst remaining alert to the fact that the liberated, sexualized, post-feminist identities the rape-revenge cycle constructs are not available to all women. As bell hooks argues in her discussion of Madonna, for example, 'the very image of sexual agency' such figures project 'has been the stick this society has used to justify its continued beating and assault on the black female body'.<sup>15</sup> It is not, however, that either of these interpretations is wrong but, as Ien Ang points out, that they represent 'two different points of view, constructed from two distinct speaking positions'.<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that the much-maligned phrase 'I'm a feminist, but...' might usefully be appropriated by feminism since, as Ang argues, in

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<sup>14</sup> The racial bias is, significantly, particularly evident in feminist discourses of rape which very rarely give any consideration to the rape of black women.

<sup>15</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> Ien Ang, 'I'm a Feminist but... "Other" Women and Postnational Feminism', in *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, ed. by Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1995), pp. 57-73 (p. 64).



problematizing and detotalizing feminist identity, it provides a position from which both black and white women can speak.<sup>17</sup>

I am also aware of the fact that as single, childless woman for whom feminism has opened up opportunities beyond the traditional feminine career of the wife and mother, I may appear to have reproduced some of the old exclusions and biases associated with 1970s feminism. In particular, I am conscious of the fact that my less sympathetic reading of the maternal avenger may be seen as an articulation of traditional feminist animosity to the identities of wife and mother. I hope it is clear from my analysis, however, that this vilification of the mother is a product of the text itself and not of my feminist reading of it. Indeed, as an older generation of feminists have grown up and themselves become mothers, many feminists have begun to rethink their traditional animosity towards motherhood.<sup>18</sup> It is for this reason, I think, that the backlash against feminism manifested itself so clearly in the representation of (working) mothers. In other words, it addressed itself to women who were already finding that the experience of motherhood was, in the words of Susan Douglas, challenging 'every feminist principle you've ever had'.<sup>19</sup> We need to be alert, therefore, to the fact that our female student body is not comprised simply of young, white, middle-class, childless women and that when they proclaim 'I'm not a feminist, but...' or 'I am a feminist, but...' there may be a different set of

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 57-73.

<sup>18</sup> See for example:

Rosalind Coward, *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get Their Way* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 278. The final chapter, from which this quote is taken, is significantly entitled 'I'm Not a Feminist, But...' and offers an interesting and informative account of feminism and the media in the 1990s.

contradictions and exclusions in play than simply the opposition between feminism and lipstick.

Rather than decrying the appropriation of feminism by dominant consumerist culture or the pressure on universities to become more entrepreneurial, then, we need to reappropriate the power of feminism to 'sell' anything from pop music to vigilante politics, to 'sell' to our students not only the 'exchange value' of an academic qualification, but the cultural and social 'use value' of feminist politics. Speaking of the way in which feminist ideas have been co-opted to sell bras and tampons, Gamman and Marshment argue that

not even the whizz-kids at Saatchi and Saatchi have total control over polysemy: if the ad talks about 'liberation', in whatever context, liberation is still what it is talking about, not confinement, and if it can sell bras perhaps it can change lives. It can work both ways. [...] if the language of popular culture changes in our direction, then maybe we can re-appropriate it for our own purposes.<sup>20</sup>

As Yvonne Tasker has observed, however, the problem facing feminist appropriations of popular culture is that they 'can all too easily reduce into an attempt to establish a fit between these forms and a pre-existing agenda'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, we need to acknowledge that we cannot define or prescribe the 'good sense' or the 'use value' of feminist politics in advance, that there is no 'authentic' feminism or

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<sup>20</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 'Introduction', in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (London: The Women's Press, 1988), pp. 1-7 (p. 4).

<sup>21</sup> Yvonne Tasker, 'Having It All: Feminism and the Pleasures of the Popular', in *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey (London: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 85-96 (p. 95).

feminist identity that exists independently of its insertion into cultural forms, practices and contexts. Rather, as I hope to have shown, feminism, like femininity, is culturally and historically specific, is constantly being negotiated and transformed. For this reason, the popularity of phrases such as 'I'm not a feminist, but...' or 'I am a feminist, but...' are not causes for concern, but important indicators of the way in which ordinary women are entering into the struggle to negotiate and define the public, everyday meanings of feminism and femininity. Those of us who unequivocally define ourselves as feminists would do well to climb down from our academic ivory towers and join this struggle since, if we are to bridge the gap between the academic and the public, the theoretical and the political, we need, as Andrea Stuart has argued, 'to build bridges and create alliances, based not so much on fixed identities but on flexible *identifications*'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Stuart, 'Feminism: Dead or Alive?', in *Identity*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 28-42 (p. 41).



## FILMOGRAPHY OF PRIMARY TEXTS

Title: *The Accused*

Country/Year: USA, 1988

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Director: Jonathan Kaplan

Producers: Stanley R. Jaffe, Sherry Lansing

Screenplay: Tom Topor

Leading Players: Jodie Foster (*Sarah Tobias*), Kelly McGillis (*Katheryn Murphy*), Bernie Coulson (*Kenneth Joyce*), Ann Hearn (*Sally Frazer*), Steve Antin (*Bob Joiner*).

Title: *Anatomy of a Murder*

Country/Year: USA, 1959

Production Company: Carlyle

Director: Otto Preminger

Producer: Otto Preminger

Screenplay: Wendell Mayes, from the novel by Robert Traver

Leading Players: James Stewart (*Paul Biegler*), Lee Remick (*Laura Manion*), Ben Gazzara (*Lieutenant Frederick Manion*), Arthur O'Connell (*Parnell McCarthy*), Eve Arden (*Maida*), Kathryn Grant (*Mary Pilant*).

Title: *Batman Returns*

Country/Year: USA, 1992

Production Company: Warner Bros

Director: Tim Burton

Producers: Denise Di Novi, Tim Burton

Screenplay: Daniel Waters

Leading Players: Michael Keaton (*Batman/Bruce Wayne*), Danny DeVito (*Oswald Cobblepot/The Penguin*), Michelle Pfeiffer (*Catwoman/Selina Kyle*), Christopher Walken (*Max Shreck*), Michael Gough (*Alfred*), Michael Murphy (*Mayor*), Cristi Conaway (*Ice Princess*), Andrew Bryniarski (*Chip*), Pat Hingle (*Commissioner Gordon*).

Title: *The Birth of a Nation*

Country/Year: USA, 1915

Production Company: Epoch Producing Corporation

Director: D.W. Griffith

Producer: D.W. Griffith

Screenplay: D.W. Griffith, Thomas Dixon and Frank Woods, from the novel *The Clansman* by Rev. Thomas Dixon Jr.

Leading Players: Henry B. Walthall (*Colonel Ben Cameron*), Mae Marsh (*Flora Cameron*), Miriam Cooper (*Margaret Cameron*), Josephine Crowell (*Mrs. Cameron*), Spottiswoode Aitken (*Dr. Cameron*), André Beranger (*Wade Cameron*), Lillian Gish (*Elsie Stoneman*).

Title: *Blackmail*

Country/Year: GB, 1929

Production Company: British International Pictures

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Producer: John Maxwell

Screenplay: Benn W. Levy, Charles Bennett, Alfred Hitchcock and Garnett Weston, from the play by Charles Bennett

Leading Players: Anny Ondra (*Alice White*), Sara Allgood (*Mrs. White*), John Longden (*Frank Webber*), Charles Paton (*Mr. White*), Donald Calthorp (*Tracy*), Cyril Ritchard (*Crewe*).

Title: *Broken Blossoms*

Country/Year: USA, 1919

Production Company: D.W. Griffith Inc.

Director: D.W. Griffith

Producer: D.W. Griffith

Screenplay: D.W. Griffith, based on the story 'The Chink and the Child' by Thomas Burke

Leading Players: Lillian Gish (*Lucy Burrows*), Richard Barthelmess (*Cheng Haun, The Yellow Man*), Donald Crisp (*Battling Burrows*), Arthur Howard (*Burrows' Manager*), Edward Peil (*Evil Eye*), George Beranger (*The Spying One*).

Title: *Eye for an Eye*

Country/Year: USA, 1995

Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Director: John Schlesinger

Producer: Michael I. Levy

Screenplay: Amanda Silver, Rick Jaffa, based on the novel by Erika Holzer

Leading Players: Sally Field (*Karen McCann*), Ed Harris (*Mack McCann*), Olivia Burnette (*Julie McCann*), Alexandra Kyle (*Megan McCann*), Kiefer Sutherland (*Robert Doob*), Joe Mantegna (*Detective Sergeant Denillo*), Beverly D'Angelo (*Dolly Green*), Darrell Larson (*Peter Green*), Charlayne Woodard (*Angel Kosinsky*), Philip Baker Hall (*Sidney Hughes*), Keith David (*Martin*).

Title: *Handgun* a.k.a. *Deep in the Heart*

Country/Year: USA, 1982

Production Company: Kestrel Films

Director: Tony Garnett

Producer: Tony Garnett

Screenplay: Tony Garnett

Leading Players: Karen Young (*Kathleen Sullivan*), Clayton Day (*Larry Keeler*), Suzie Humphreys (*Nancy*), Helena Humann (*Miss Davis*), Ben Jones (*Chuck*).



Title: *Hannie Caulder*

Country/Year: GB, 1971

Production Company: Tigon British Film Productions Ltd

Director: Burt Kennedy

Producer: Patrick Curtis

Screenplay: Z.X. Jones

Leading Players: Raquel Welch (*Hannie Caulder*), Robert Culp (*Thomas Price*), Christopher Lee (*Bailey*), Jack Elam (*Frank*), Strother Martin (*Rufus*), Ernest Borgnine (*Emmett*), Diana Dors (*Madame*).

Title: *In My Daughter's Name*

Country/Year: USA, 1992

Production Company: Cates/Doty Productions

Director: Jud Taylor

Producer: Dennis E. Doty

Teleplay: Mimi Rothman Schapiro, Bill Wells, from a story by Sharon Michaels and Phyllis Vernick

Leading Players: Donna Mills (*Laura Elias*), John Getz (*Michael Elias*), Ari Meyer (*Carly Elias*), Ellen Blain (*Lissa Elias*), John Rubinstein (*Ben Worrall*), Lee Grant (*Maureen Leeds*), Adam Storke (*Peter Lipton*), Penelope Branning (*Blair Lipton*), Ron Frazier (*Missildine*).

Title: *Johnny Belinda*

Country/Year: USA, 1948

Production Company: Warner Bros

Director: Jean Negulesco

Producer: Jerry Wald

Screenplay: Irmgard VonCube, Allen Vincent, from the play by Elmer Harris

Leading Players: Jane Wyman (*Belinda McDonald*), Lew Ayres (*Dr. Robert Richardson*), Charles Bickford (*Black McDonald*), Agnes Moorehead (*Aggie McDonald*), Stephen McNally (*Locky McCormick*), Jan Sterling (*Stella McGuire*).

Title: *The Last Seduction*

Country/Year: USA, 1993

Production Company: ITC Entertainment Ltd

Director: John Dahl

Producer: Jonathan Shestack

Screenplay: Steve Barancik

Leading Players: Linda Fiorentino (*Bridget Gregory*), Peter Berg (*Mike Swale*), Bill Pullman (*Clay Gregory*), J.T. Walsh (*Frank Griffith*), Bill Nunn (*Harlan*), Herb Mitchell (*Bob Trotter*), Brien Varady (*Chris*), Dean Norris (*Shep*), Donna Wilson (*Stacy*).



Title: *Outrage*

Country/Year: USA, 1950

Production Company: Filmmakers

Director: Ida Lupino

Producer: Collier Young

Screenplay: Ida Lupino, Collier Young, Marvin Wald

Leading Players: Mala Powers (*Ann Walton*), Tod Andrews (*Doc Ferguson*), Robert Clarke (*Jim Owens*), Raymond Bond (*Mr. Walton*), Lillian Hamilton (*Mrs. Walton*).

Title: *The Quick and the Dead*

Country/Year: USA, 1995

Production Company: TriStar Pictures

Director: Sam Raimi

Producers: Joshua Donen, Allen Shapiro, Patrick Markey

Screenplay: Simon Moore

Leading Players: Sharon Stone (*Ellen*), Gene Hackman (*John Herod*), Russell Crowe (*Cort*), Leonardo DiCaprio (*Kid*), Tobin Bell (*Dog Kelly*), Roberts Blossom (*Doc Wallace*), Kevin Conway (*Eugene Dred*), Keith David (*Sergeant Cantrell*), Lance Henriksen (*Ace Hanlon*), Pat Hingle (*Horace the Bartender*).

Title: *Rancho Notorious*

Country/Year: USA, 1952

Production Company: Fidelity Pictures-RKO Radio

Director: Fritz Lang

Producer: Howard Welsch

Screenplay: Daniel Taradash, from a story by Sylvia Richards

Leading Players: Marlene Dietrich (*Altar Keane*), Arthur Kennedy (*Vern Haskell*), Mel Ferrer (*Frenchy Fairmont*), Gloria Henry (*Beth*).

Title: *Sleeping with the Enemy*

Country/Year: USA, 1991

Production Company: Twentieth Century Fox

Director: Joseph Ruben

Producer: Leonard Goldberg

Screenplay: Ronald Bass, based on the novel by Nancy Price

Leading Players: Julia Roberts (*Laura/Sara*), Patrick Bergin (*Martin*), Kevin Anderson (*Ben*), Elizabeth Lawrence (*Chloe*), Kyle Secor (*Fleishman*).

Title: *Thelma and Louise*

Country/Year: USA, 1991

Production Company: Pathé Entertainment Inc, A Percy Main Production

Director: Ridley Scott

Producers: Ridley Scott, Mimi Polk

Screenplay: Callie Khouri

Leading Players: Susan Sarandon (*Louise Sawyer*), Geena Davis (*Thelma Dickinson*), Harvey Keitel (*Hal Slocombe*), Michael Madsen (*Jimmy*), Christopher McDonald (*Darryl*), Stephen Tobolowsky (*Max*), Brad Pitt (*J.D.*), Timothy Carhart (*Harlan*).

Title: *Unforgiven*

Country/Year: USA, 1992

Production Company: Warner Bros.

Director: Clint Eastwood

Producer: Clint Eastwood

Screenplay: David Webb Peoples

Leading Players: Clint Eastwood (*William Munny*), Gene Hackman (*'Little Bill' Daggett*), Morgan Freeman (*Ned Logan*), Richard Harris (*English Bob*), Jaimz Woolvett (*'Schofield Kid'*), Saul Rubinek (*W.W. Beauchamp*), Frances Fisher (*Strawberry Alice*), Anna Thompson (*Delilah Fitzgerald*), David Mucci (*Quick Mike*), Rob Campbell (*Davey Bunting*), Anthony James (*Skinny Dubois*).

Title: *The Virgin Spring*

Country/Year: Sweden, 1959

Production Company: Svensk Filmindustri

Director: Ingmar Bergman

Producers: Ingmar Bergman, Allan Ekelund

Screenplay: Ulla Isaksson

Leading Players: Max von Sydow (*Herr Töre*), Brigitta Pettersson (*Karin Töre*), Birgitta Valberg (*Mareta Töre*), Gunnel Lindblom (*Ingeri*), Axel Duberg (*Thin Herdsman*), Tor Isedal (*Mute Herdsman*), Ove Porath (*Boy*).

Title: *The Wind*

Country/Year: USA, 1928

Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Picture Corp.

Director: Victor Seastrom

Producer: No producer credited

Screenplay: Frances Marion, from the novel by Dorothy Scarborough

Leading Players: Lillian Gish (*Letty*), Lars Hanson (*Lige*), Montagu Love (*Roddy Wirt*), Dorothy Cummings (*Cora*), Edward Earle (*Beverly*), William Orlamond (*Sourdough*).

## FILMOGRAPHY OF SECONDARY TEXTS

- Bad Girls* (Jonathan Kaplan, USA, 1994)
- The Ballad of Little Jo* (Maggie Greenwald, USA, 1993)
- Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, USA, 1992)
- Batman* (Leslie Martinson, USA, 1966)
- Batman* (Tim Burton, USA, 1989)
- The Beguiled* (Donald Siegel, USA, 1970)
- The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1963)
- Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 1990)
- Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, USA, 1981)
- Body of Evidence* (Uli Edel, USA, 1992)
- Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1992)
- The Bravados* (Henry King, USA, 1958)
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fran Rubel Kuzui, USA, 1992)
- Carrie* (Brian de Palma, USA, 1976)
- Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, USA, 1974)
- Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, USA, 1990)
- Deliverance* (John Boorman, USA, 1972)
- Dirty Weekend* (Michael Winner, GB, 1992)
- Dona Barbara* (Fernando de Fuentes, Mexico, 1942)
- Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, USA, 1944)
- Extremities* (Robert M. Young, USA, 1986)
- Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, USA, 1987)
- Final Analysis* (Phil Joanou, USA, 1992)
- A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, Italy, W. Germany, Spain, 1964)



*Frenzy* (Alfred Hitchcock, GB, 1972)  
*The Greatest Question* (D.W. Griffith, USA, 1919)  
*Halloween* (John Carpenter, USA, 1978)  
*The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, USA/Germany, 1990)  
*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, USA, 1992)  
*Hunter's Blood* (Robert C. Hughes, USA, 1986)  
*Innocent Blood* (John Landis, USA, 1992)  
*I Spit on Your Grave* a.k.a *Day of the Woman* (Meir Zarchi, USA, 1977)  
*Kill Me Again* (John Dahl, USA, 1989)  
*Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, USA, 1955)  
*Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, USA, 1972)  
*Last Train from Gun Hill* (John Sturges, USA, 1959)  
*Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, USA, 1976)  
*The Man from Laramie* (Anthony Mann, USA, 1955)  
*Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1964)  
*Mortal Thoughts* (Alan Rudolph, USA, 1991)  
*Ms. 45* a.k.a *Angel of Vengeance* (Abel Ferrara, USA, 1981)  
*My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, USA, 1946)  
*Nevada Smith* (Henry Hathaway, USA, 1966)  
*Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (F.W. Murnau, Germany, 1922)  
*Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, USA, 1942)  
*One-Eyed Jacks* (Marlon Brando, USA, 1961)  
*Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, USA, 1985)  
*Play Misty for Me* (Clint Eastwood, USA, 1971)  
*Positive I.D.* (Andy Anderson, USA, 1987)

- Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, USA, 1990)
- Prom Night* (Paul Lynch, USA, 1980)
- Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA, 1972)
- The Rape of Dr. Willis* (Lou Antonio, USA, 1992)
- Red Rock West* (John Dahl, USA, 1993)
- Settle the Score* (Edwin Sherin, USA, 1989)
- Sexual Intent* (Kurt MacCarley, USA, 1992)
- Shame* (Steve Jodrell, Australia, 1988)
- She Said No* (John Patterson, USA, 1990)
- Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, USA, 1995)
- Sliver* (Philip Noyce, USA, 1993)
- Stagecoach* (John Ford, USA, 1939)
- Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, USA, 1938)
- Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, USA, 1983)
- Terror Train* (Roger Spottiswoode, Canada, 1979)
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hopper, USA, 1974)
- A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, USA, 1996)
- Under Capricorn* (Alfred Hitchcock, GB, 1949)
- The Velvet Vampire* (Stephanie Rothman, USA, 1971)
- Without Her Consent* (Sander Stern, USA, 1990)
- Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, USA, 1987)

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